

ADVENTURE CALLING

MYSTERY ROMANCES

by

SYDNEY HORLER.

- Adventure Calling!*
Princess after Dark
The Spy
Cavalier of Chance
Checkmate
Danger's Bright Eyes
Horror's Head
Vivanti Returns
The Evil Château
The Screaming Skull
Lady of the Night
The Secret Service Man
The Mystery of No. 1
False-Face
The House of Secrets
Vivanti
The Black Heart
In the Dark
Miss Mystery
The Curse of Doonee
Chipstead of the Lone Hand
Heart Cut Diamond
The Worst Man in the World



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ADVENTURE CALLING!

BY
SYDNEY HORLER



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TO
MY FRIEND
H. A. TAYLOR

Whose gift for serial buying amounts almost to
genius!

LONG

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PHILIP CRANE yawned with relief as the express came shudderingly to a stop. The journey had seemed interminable. What was the good of a holiday if one spent the better part of the first day in the train ?

Feeling intolerably cramped, he flung open the carriage door, sprang on to the platform, and called : " Porter ! "

High above even the deafening clamour of the great terminus rose the cry : it might have been an old-time battle chant. Men and women stopped to look at the owner of that virile voice. They saw a young man of athletic build, good-looking, likeable, filled obviously with the zest of life.

A porter materialised from the midst of a crowd of other passengers, and placed himself at Crane's disposal.

" Anything in the van, sir ? "

" No. Just these two suit-cases."

" Taxi, sir ? "

"Well," considering, "I don't quite know. I want an hotel."

"Couldn't do better than the Mid-Western, sir," pointing to the great railway hotel adjoining the terminus. "Shall I take them over?"

"Good hotel, is it?"

The porter's face showed a look of polite wonderment.

"One of the best in London, sir, the Mid-Western."

"Very well. It doesn't matter very much, in any case."

The two suit-cases were taken from the rack, and, with his overcoat slung over his left arm, the man who had come to London on a holiday proceeded to walk in the wake of the porter up the still thronged platform.

On the right was a wide roadway leading out of the station, and along this taxis and cars were speeding at what any sensible-minded person would have considered a dangerous pace.

It was all new, however, to Crane—new and fascinating—and he stopped for a moment to watch the fierce-flowing tide of traffic.

As he did so, his whole body suddenly became rigid. A girl, carrying a suit-case in her right hand, had foolishly attempted to cross that

maelstrom of traffic. In the middle of the road she appeared to slip. . . .

What happened afterwards he himself was never able to recollect very clearly. But the spectators saw this young man, who appeared, even on sight, to have such a winning personality, fling his overcoat aside and rush into the roadway with the speed of an even-timer.

They watched him swoop down, pick up the girl, swerve violently as a great car missed them both by no more than a few inches, and carry her safely to the other side of the street.

A burst of cheering broke from the amazed crowd as he set the trembling girl on her feet and endeavoured to soothe her shattered nerves.

A whisper came up to him.

" They meant to kill me ! "

Looking into her face, he saw that it was white and shaken.

He did not know what to reply. Taken on their surface value, of course, the words were ridiculous. It was inconceivable that anyone should wish to do an injury to such a charming creature. The statement, he decided, was merely the reflex of the girl's quite natural hysteria, consequent upon the terrible shock she had sustained.

Then comprehension commenced to dawn in the brown eyes and she smiled faintly at him.

"How can I thank you?" she said in a low tone.

"There's no need," he replied. "I was just lucky—that's all. Feeling better now?"

She sighed, evidently making an effort to pull herself together.

"Oh, yes—much."

"Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks, really—I'm quite all right."

She held out a small, gloved hand.

"Thank you again—ever so much. It's very lame, I know, but I can't think what else to say."

She seemed so small, standing in the midst of that great railway terminus, with the crowds hurrying by, that he had a reluctance to leave her.

"Can I take you anywhere?" he ventured.

"Thanks very much—but I know my way." The animation in her face was negatived by the still hushed tones.

As he turned away, after raising his hat, he felt compelled to look back—the girl's voice haunted him.

He muttered an apology to the porter.

" Sorry to keep you waiting."

" That's all right, sir. Very plucky of you to have done what you did just now."

Crane laughed the compliment off, and walked ahead into the entrance hall of the big hotel.

Without saying anything to the uniformed clerk in the office, he pulled the register towards him, and wrote his name—surely there would be no fear of not getting a room ! Then, taking a card, which bore simply his name, from a case, he placed it on the book.

The man took up the pasteboard, glanced at it, and made a surprising statement.

" There are some letters for you, Mr. Crane," he said.

Had he not still been thinking of the girl, Philip might never have started on that strange adventure which was to occupy his mind and body for the next few days—an adventure as bizarre as any man could have encountered on entering that modern Bagdad which is marked " London " on the map of the world.

Instead :

" Thanks," he remarked mechanically, scarcely realising what he was saying. Putting the three letters into his coat pocket, he followed the boots who had been summoned to the lift.

Outside a door on the second floor, the boots stopped.

"This is your suite, Mr. Crane."

Suite? There must be some mistake.

But the boots opening the door with a master-key, he followed the man in.

"I hope you will find everything comfortable, Mr. Crane."

"I'm sure I shall." He intended the comment as a joke, for already he had seen that, instead of the single bedroom he had been going to take, this suite consisted of a bedroom, a sitting-room, and a bath-room, all extremely well furnished.

"Thank you, sir."

The man went before he could recover from his surprise. But when the first agreeable shock was over, he started to laugh. Some error had been made, of course, but he was not going to do the rectifying! Why should he? A fellow didn't win a thousand pounds—Heaven bless the *Daily Meteor*—every day of his life. It was upon getting the *Meteor's* cheque for a brain-racking crossword competition that he had told his uncle he was going off to celebrate. And what better place to celebrate a wonderful stroke of luck than London? If the Mid-Western Hotel people wanted to give him a private suite,

he wouldn't deprive them of the pleasure! He had money enough to pay for it.

Having made a survey of his little kingdom and found it very agreeably to his taste, he sat down in an easy chair and turned on the electric-fire. Might as well make the best of things!

Then, lighting a pipe—couldn't do anything without a pipe—he proceeded leisurely to unpack. He had not felt quite like this since his school-days: come to that, he was very much like a kid on holiday! For a full fortnight he was going to forget everything about business and just revel in unexpected pleasures. By "unexpected" he meant ideas which might crop up on the spur of the moment; he had no set programme—he was just going to let life take hold of him and carry him away where it would. Theatres, restaurants, a football match, perhaps, certainly some cinemas, and—oh, well, anything that offered. He didn't care; he was ready to enjoy it all. He hadn't been in London for at least eight years, and this was going to be the time of his life! As he came to the decision, his good-looking face was one broad grin.

Having unpacked—what a lark to have all those cupboards: this might be a bridal suite; probably was—he remembered the three letters

with which he had been so mysteriously presented at the hotel office half an hour before.

He pulled them out wonderingly. There was something very strange in this. To begin with, no one—himself included—had had the least idea that he would be putting up at the Mid-Western. Like everything else about this trip, he had allowed Fate to decide. He had made no reservation at any hotel, leaving his choice to chance upon his arrival.

Then who could have sent these letters ?

Rummy !

Still, they were all undoubtedly addressed to him.

There was the typewritten address :

*Philip Crane, Esq.,
Mid-Western Hotel,
London, S.W.1*

Very, very rummy !

Should he open them ? Well, there was his name on the envelope. An overwhelming sense of curiosity made him take the plunge. The three envelopes were ripped quickly one after the other.

Inside each he found a single sheet of paper

There was no address and no date, and the type-written communication, in every instance, was completely unintelligible, consisting of a jumble of figures spaced at regular intervals.

What had been rummy before now became damned mysterious! He felt he wanted to go to the wash-hand stand and apply cooling water to his fevered brow. Each letter had been written in either a secret code or cipher. .

Cipher, by Jove! . . .

Who wanted to write to him in this peculiar fashion? But that question did not take long to answer. The conviction came like a thunderbolt that these things were not meant for him—*but for another man of the same name!*

What was he to do? The obvious thing, naturally, was to go down to the hotel office, make as good an explanation as was possible, and then clear out. He would look no end of a fool, of course. And although this would not be the first occasion of the kind, he felt that the day was too auspicious in which to make such a confession.

What decided him was the knowledge that, after all, he had not acted dishonourably. Those letters which belonged to someone else were completely unreadable to him.

Here was mystery.

He tingled at the thought. By some extraordinary chance, he must have become involved in one of those sensational happenings that were to be read about occasionally in the newspapers. These things were always staged in London. Caution and common sense applied a cool douche. The management would understand when he told them how the mistake had occurred. At the worst they could only charge him for a day's tenancy of the suite.

No, he'd be damned if he would ! This was an opportunity too good to be missed. Life in his uncle's drawing office was too dull to let a chance like this go by. He was on holiday—and a touch of adventure thrown in was all to the good. He would sit tight and see what came next.

This decision was so stimulating that he felt he must get out of doors. The room, spacious as it was, seemed too small. Besides, he wanted exercise—and a dinner at some swagger restaurant where, however, there was no necessity to dress. He'd go to Vernay's—or one of those places in Soho. He would choose later.

At the office he stopped for a moment to exchange a word with the clerk.

"How long have you been keeping my rooms?" he asked.

He could understand now why so many boys wished to become detectives in after life.

The reply was prompt.

"Immediately we received your wireless from the *Aquitania*, Mr. Crane."

"Yes, of course." Mumbling this conventional response, he turned away to hide his face.

This thing was getting richer and richer. Where was it to end? He didn't care twopence as long as the developments were interesting. So the *real* Philip Crane came from America; he remembered reading in the train that the *Aquitania* was due to berth at Southampton that morning. America—and Truro! And yet, that great distance had been bridged: the widely divergent points of the compass had met at the Mid-Western Hotel, S.W.1!

As he passed through the swing-doors leading to the street he smiled to himself at the thought of his uncle's face when, returning home from that holiday, he narrated his experiences in the modern Babylon. Sir Timothy Padden's adventures were confined to the designing of aeroplane engines; his outlook otherwise was

amusingly restricted. Still, he was a genius in his own line—dear old chap !

But he had become fossilised down at Truro. Modern life meant nothing to him—he allowed it to pass him by. He had wished his nephew good night the previous evening with the words : “ I dare say you are going to London expecting to find some kind of romance ? Don’t deceive yourself : the world goes too swiftly for romance these days.”

CHAPTER II THE RED MADONNA

HE had dined well at Vernay's. The head waiter had seemed to make a special point of treating him as a distinguished customer, and the food and wine had been most excellent.

Lighting a cigar at the match which the *maitre d'hôtel* himself struck, Crane felt that life could scarcely hold a better moment than this. He was on top of the world.

A taxi to St. James's Theatre brought him his first disappointment:

"Sorry, sir, but there's not a seat left."

This was a blow. He had been looking forward to seeing the drama "Wandering Men" ever since its first-night performance which had received such rapturous notice from the critics. Of course he had only himself to blame: in this, as in the matter of the hotel, he had not troubled to write beforehand.

"I can give you a stall for to-morrow night," suggested the box-office clerk.

"Oh, can you? Thanks."

He paid his money, took his ticket and turned away.

With so many other places to choose from, the thought of another show, however, seemed flat in comparison. He would have a wander through the streets, fascinating at that time of night to a provincial like himself. The savour of London was too fine to be gulped. To get its full relish he must digest it by degrees.

It was when he had gone about a dozen yards from the theatre that he suddenly turned. A thick-set man following immediately at his heels was unable to avoid the contact, and the two collided.

"I should like to know why you're following me?" said Crane.

"Following you?" repeated the other man. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, sir. If I have been going in the same direction as yourself, I assure you it is purely coincidence. I am a stranger to London, and just wandering around to kill time."

The speaker had a stern, hard face, but it contained a certain likeable quality. Crane was instantly apologetic.

"Sorry if I'm wrong," he said, "but honestly I imagined you were following me all over

the show. Weren't you at Vernay's to-night ? ”

“ Yes, I was,” admitted the other. “ But, once again, let me assure you that you are entirely wrong in your surmise.”

With this Crane was tempted to pal up, but before he could make any advance the man had turned abruptly and walked quickly away. Had Crane followed him in turn he would have seen him go into the nearest Underground station telephone booth and make a call. The message he sent was received at Scotland Yard.

It was strangely stimulating for a yokel like himself to walk through those thronged streets of the Theatre District, dazzling to the eye with beautiful women and well-dressed men. Fancy Truro after this !

Crane walked on, and on, too absorbed to bother about the distance ; and he was only agreeably tired upon arrival back at the Mid-Western Hotel.

Going to the office for his key, he was greeted by an announcement from the night-clerk.

“ Mr. Crane ? ” asked the man.

“ Yes ? ”

“ A lady has called to see you, Mr. Crane.”

“ A lady ? ” Here was another staggering surprise. He didn't know a single woman in

London. But he must continue to play up. This was only another incident in the strange chain of circumstances in which somehow he had become involved.

" Did she mention any name ? "

" No, sir ; she merely said that you were expecting her."

" Where is she now ? "

" She was shown up to your suite, sir."

Very gratifying, this deference to a mere engineer's draughtsman, and, unconsciously, Philip preened himself. This was undoubtedly the Life. A private suite—letters in cipher—unknown women calling. . . .

He walked to the lift briskly.

He was ready for a surprise. But the girl who rose to meet him fairly took his breath away. At first, he did not think she could possibly belong to the ordinary world ; there was a languorous grace about her which bewildered him. She was dressed in a fashion which he knew must denote wealth and what he could only describe as " cosmopolitanism." Instantly, a phrase which he imagined he must have borrowed sub-consciously from a film title, flashed into his mind. There was only one apt description for this mysterious visitor—" The Red Madonna."

She was a person of striking contrasts ; her chestnut hair showed off the exquisitely fair skin of neck and shoulders visible beneath the flung-back opera cloak. Her face was arrestingly beautiful, the features being classical and the line from ear to chin finely moulded. She was in her prime ; he imagined her age to be about twenty-six. A glorious creature ! Glorious—and yet somehow dangerous : a woman to be watched. So much his natural common sense told him.

So vivid was the personality of this unexpected caller that he was unable to speak ; and it was the visitor who made the first remark.

“ I have been waiting here for at least an hour,” she stated.

Crane, although stupefied, obeyed the instinctive law of courtesy.

“ I’m most awfully sorry,” he replied in a tone of contrition.

“ I cannot accept any excuse ! You were given definite instructions—you received the letters ? ” she broke off sharply to inquire.

At this early stage in the proceedings, Crane came to the conclusion that beauty, standing alone, could be rated too highly : this woman had sufficient good looks to lead an army corps to

destruction, but behind the classical features flamed a devil. She was a virago. He gave his common sense a pat on the back.

"Answer me!" she cried; "did you receive the letters which were sent to this hotel?"

He remembered the cipher communications.

"Yes—of course. They were here awaiting me." He did not know why he was carrying on this stupid game, except that the woman was temporarily dominating him.

"Then, why weren't you here to keep the appointment? If I told Stevensson——" She stopped and looked at Crane as though she wanted to read his soul.

"You are much younger than I imagined. They said you were thirty-five, and wore a moustache," then came the challenge.

"So I did until ten days ago. Then I got tired of it." He smiled at the silly conceit which had leapt into his mind merely because the first statement happened to be true.

The woman seized on the words.

"Were you suspected? Was that why you shaved off your moustache? Come here!" Because he did not obey the command immediately, she stepped forward and, taking him by the shoulders, drew his face down. At first,

Philip had the insane notion that she meant to kiss him, but the fierceness in her face belied any such idea.

"Yes, you are speaking the truth," she said.

So dynamic was her manner that he actually felt an overwhelming relief. It was as though he was a real player in this mystery-drama, instead of being a mere understudy—and a fraudulent one at that. . . .

"You know what you are to do?" the interrogation proceeded; "but I am wasting time," she went on in that same tempestuous fashion; "everything was detailed clearly in the letters. By the way, what have you done with them?"

"I thought it best to lock them up." This again was the truth.

It seemed to calm somewhat the storm.

"Yes; you can't be too careful. Anything happen on the voyage over?"

"No—nothing." The game was beginning to intrigue him now; and the belief that there was possibly something crooked in it added to the interest. Strange country, certainly, but the going, although mysterious, was fascinating.

"No one followed you here, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of. A fellow bumped into me in King Street, St. James's, to-night, but I

put the breeze up him properly, and he soon cleared off." Time was giving him confidence ; he was beginning to feel that, up till now, he had not done so badly in his totally unrehearsed part. A sense of humour made him add sharply : " You ought to have had more sense than to come here dressed like that. With your hair and figure, everyone in the hotel will remember you."

He expected an explosion, but, instead, he saw something of the anger die down in the handsome face.

" I had to dress—I'm going on to the Rosy Dawn Night Club. Svensson is to be there. Have you met Svensson yet ? "

" No—not yet." It was too much to hope that she would put all her remaining questions in that form, but, so long as she did, he could stick to the truth without, apparently, any great risk of the consequences.

" I expect he'll want me to bring him back here," she added.

Crane considered it time to register his disapproval. He was on a much-needed holiday ; he couldn't have his rooms—and a private suite at that !—littered up with a lot of mysterious beings who belonged by rights to the films.

" No—you can't do that ! "

"No?" There was a challenge in the monosyllable.

"I won't allow it—do you think I want all Scotland Yard prowling round?" That was a good one, he thought; and when he saw the woman bite her lip and give evident serious consideration to his rebuke, he knew he had struck a bull's-eye.

"Then you'll have to come with me to the Rosy Dawn."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

He couldn't tell her, he supposed, that he had decided on trying to get a rubber of bridge—he doubted if she would understand.

"To-morrow must do," he temporised; "it was a beast of a journey"—which was more or less correct—"and I want to rest—be alone." The latter statement, whilst being possibly ungallant, was, at least, strictly accurate.

"Stevensson will want your report."

"He must wait for it." He'd have to wait a jolly long time, too. "I can't be bothered with anything to-night. There's not that much hurry." If his eyes had not been fixed on the woman's face, he would have grinned.

"You seem to have learned independence in

America, but I warn you, Crane, that that sort of stuff won't go with Stevensson, or with——" She broke off quickly as, for the third time since this interview had started, a puzzled expression which seemed to be more than half suspicion, flashed into her face.

"You don't speak with any American accent," she said.

"Of course I don't; don't you know that I'm a Cornishman, and that a Cornishman never acquires any accent but his own?" This farce must end. He yawned.

"I hate to be rude, but I'm going to bed. Make any appointment you like for after eleven to-morrow morning, but you'll have to excuse me now: I want to make up for the sleep I've lost."

Pretty good, he thought. When the woman was gone, he'd roar with laughter and try to speculate what it all meant on his way to the smoking-room.

His visitor rose at the unmistakable hint.

"All right," she said curtly, "I'll go. I don't know what Stevensson will say, though."

Crane yawned again in a most realistic manner.

"Let him say what he likes. Good night." Crossing to the door, he opened it.

She looked at him again in that strangely-intent fashion.

"I'll tell Svensson that I think you're too good-looking for the job," she said ; " the girl may fall in love with you." The words were accompanied by a short, hard laugh.

"The girl——?" He had repeated the two words before pulling himself up. A very disturbing mental picture had flashed across his brain : he saw himself looking again into brown eyes that were sorely troubled.

"It's all set down in your instructions—anyone would think you hadn't read them ! You're to look after the girl—keep her out of mischief !" Another sharp, abrupt laugh. " Svensson's looking for her now in his big green car : she's somewhere in London."

A further memory stabbed his brain : that juggernaut from whose wheels he had snatched the girl had been painted green !

PHILIP did some lightning reflection. That memory kept returning to him. He saw again a girl's face: it was white with fear. Whispered words came from her lips: " They meant to kill me ! "

The vision lasted for at least half a minute, and at the end of that time a full explanation of this mystery had arrived. The situation was clear. His former surmise was correct: by some extraordinary chance he had been mistaken for a crook. This woman, who evidently belonged to a gang, believed he was someone else. That explained everything, of course—including the cryptograms in the letters bearing his name. What a joke! And for this amazing thing to have happened to *him*—a quiet, ordinary, common-place draughtsman who had come from Truro, of all places in the world!

But this mood of jocularity soon passed. He became serious. It was the thought of that girl's face, the terror he remembered seeing in

her eyes, that brought the gravity back into his mind.

But for his quick dash, she would now have been dead. *Dead!* It was a horrible thought to associate with anyone so young and beautiful, so fragrant and so vibrant with the happiness that should have been hers.

Then a third thought came. This affair, however big it might be, concerned exclusively other people. It was no business of his. And yet, although his native common sense, he knew, had dictated it, he was not prepared to listen to this voice of Caution. Dull and uneventful his life up till now certainly had been ; he was the last person to be associated with any foolish Don Quixotry, but——. He was a man, and what man with any spirit could allow this fiendish scheme to go through without attempting to raise a hand to prevent it ?

“ What are you thinking about ? ” The words, sharply uttered, recalled Philip to himself. He had to pretend. He must endeavour, so far as he was able, to continue to play the part of the crook for whom he was mistaken. This woman, cool, sophisticated, and intelligent, as she undoubtedly was, had to be deceived—if that was possible.

He looked across at her, smiling.

"What was that you said?" he queried.

His companion lit the cigarette which she had just taken from a tortoiseshell case.

"I said that the girl might possibly fall in love with you," was the reply.

He seized on the words.

"Well, that would be all to the good, surely?" he heard himself saying. Extraordinary how quick-witted even a prosaic person like himself could become when necessity called! Only a few hours in the invigorating atmosphere of London, and he had already parted company with the Philip Crane of Truro.

He followed up this first success.

"Where am I to find this girl?" he asked, trying to put what he imagined to be an American accent into the words.

The woman smiled again, slowly, enigmatically, mysteriously.

"Stevensson will know. Which reminds me: I must be getting away to tell him your message: that you're too busy to be bothered with him to-night, and that he must wait your pleasure until the morning."

Crane lit a cigarette to try to quiet his throbbing nerves. The woman was gibing, threatening him. This man Stevensson was evidently a person

to be feared ; he had been a fool to flout his authority.

That was if he intended to go on with this mad business.

Caution told him not to be a fool. What could he hope to gain by meddling with the dangerous affairs of these complete strangers ? The sensible course would be to make a clean breast of things to date—tell this girl that he was merely Philip Crane from matter-of-fact Truro, hand over the cipher letters to her, say that he had carried on so far through a perverted sense of humour, and that he was now finished with the thing. She would be angry, no doubt, but that could not be helped. Yes, that was the only sensible way.

“ Look here——” he started. And then, suddenly, stopped. No, damn it, he couldn’t be such a rotten funk. That girl he had saved from being murdered. . . . His mind was definitely made up ; he was going to see this affair through. Although he might be mistaken in his guess that these crooks wanted the unknown girl dead—perhaps the driver of the green car had merely wanted to kidnap her—yet she was certainly in danger.

“ Yes ? ” encouraged his companion.

"I was joking just now. Of course, I shall have to see Svensson myself. No doubt he'll be expecting me."

"He certainly will," was the reply. The words were accompanied by an enigmatic smile.

They had drawn blank at the "Rosy Dawn."

"Svensson must be home," the girl said; "there was a chance he might not be able to come here to-night."

Ten minutes later the taxi drew up before a solid-looking house in the Bayswater Road. Although Crane had not been to London for some years, he knew that the great open space on the other side was Kensington Gardens. He realised too, from the outside of this house, that it must be the home of a man who was well-to-do. It was a typical residence, so far as he could tell, of a prosperous merchant prince.

"Is this the place?" he asked.

The girl nodded.

"Simon does himself well," she said, with a sly smile.

Dismissing the taxi, the speaker led the way up a broad flight of well-kept steps, and rang the bell at the massive mahogany door.

The atmosphere so far was reassuring; every-

thing spoke of a well-ordered staff of servants who, under the critical eye of mistress or housekeeper, did their work zealously.

This initial impression was further strengthened by the sight of the immaculately-groomed manservant who opened the door.

"Yes," the latter replied, in a smooth, deferential voice: "Mr. Stevensson is in, and will be pleased to see Miss Felstead."

"Come along, Crane," the girl said over her shoulder.

This was undoubtedly the home of a successful man. Crane, feeling that his first view had been correct, followed his guide down a carpeted hall lined on both sides with artistically-framed etchings. There were one or two pieces of furniture which he knew must be "period"; a handsome dower-chest and a Chippendale stand amongst them. Before they had reached the end, a door opened on the left, and a man appeared.

"Hello, Simon," said the girl; "I've brought Crane with me."

From the first glance, Philip guessed that the other was able to read his secret. It was a disquieting thought, and, but for showing a humiliating cowardice, he would have turned away and

rushed towards the front door. As it was, he faced Simon Stevansson with a display of assurance that was altogether out of harmony with his private feelings.

"Glad to see you, Crane," his host said ; "come on in."

He threw open the door to give a view of a room that fitted in admirably with the rest of the house. It was comfortably as well as tastefully furnished. In the immense bay window on the other side stood a massive mahogany writing-desk ; whilst scattered about the room were several deep-backed easy chairs. Philip thought, as he followed the girl inside, that he might have been visiting a famous London consultant.

Closing the door behind him, Stevansson went to the sideboard.

"I never believe in starting a business talk without first having a drink," he said ; "what's yours, Crane ?"

He had to answer. Down in Truro, his favourite beverage was a glass of home-brewed ale, but this rustic taste would sound plebeian in a place like this. Still, he'd risk it.

"When I'm in England, I like your beer," he said ; "it's so different from our muck."

Stevensson shook his head—it seemed so narrow to Crane as to be almost abnormal.

“ I dare say I could get you a bottle of beer from the servants’ quarters, but——”

“ Oh, let it be whisky, then,” put in the visitor.

“ And you, Judith ? ”

Judith ! That was just the name he would have given the girl himself.

“ Oh, whisky, of course—and don’t drown it.”

Crane remained on edge. His brain was full of whirling thoughts—some of them absurd, perhaps ; but, being absolutely certain that the man had mistrusted him at first glance, the drink which he would shortly have to consume might be drugged. He looked across at the girl. She was sitting perfectly at her ease, knees crossed, showing a generous length of beautifully shaped, silken-clad leg. A siren, this, to captivate the senses of any man, and, if his mind had not been so full of the other girl, he might have made a fool of himself before.

Stevensson interrupted his reflections by bringing across a tumbler full of whisky and soda.

“ Here’s how,” the man said, raising his own glass.

The next minute, the three had drunk.

Whilst Crane was putting down his glass, he

studied his host closely. Simon Stevensson appeared to be about forty years of age. He had the thin, ascetic face so often associated with Church of England ministers. But the expression on it was sly, crafty and treacherous. This effect was increased by a monotonous note in his voice ; somehow Crane could not rid himself of the idea that, at some time or other, Stevensson must have served in Holy Orders. It seemed a fantastic idea, but, nevertheless, it persisted.

"I don't think I shall require you now, Judith," Stevensson remarked ; and the girl, after a glance at Crane, which the latter could not help noticing was slightly malicious, smiled and left the room.

Philip was sorry she had gone. Somehow, she seemed a link with his old life—the life that had existed before he entered this house. Another fantastic notion, but he was persuaded that existence would take on a very different aspect for him from this moment.

Yes, he would have been glad if the girl had stayed. Although a potential enemy, he felt lonely now that he was left alone with this man who was surveying him with a thin, merciless smile.

"So you've got safely to London, Crane ? "

" Yes ; nothing very wonderful in that, surely ? " He had to put up a bluff.

" No ; as you say, nothing very remarkable in that. . . . Well, you have read the letters, of course ? "

" Certainly."

" Where are they now ? "

Philip remembered what he had told the girl.

" I locked them up in a drawer at the hotel."

" After memorising them ? "

" Yes," he lied ; " I was able to get every word."

What would happen if his host asked him to repeat the messages—for such the letters had evidently been—he did not care to contemplate. One could carry a bluff too far, it seemed. But still, what else could he have replied in the circumstances ? As a trusted member of the gang, or organisation, he would be expected to decipher any code messages that were sent to him.

To his relief, Svensson did not press the point.

" That's all right, then," the man said ; " and now you know what The Empress wants, what do you think of the scheme ? "

Philip's brain was working at high pressure. He had to rely upon the information which ~~the~~

girl had already passed on to him. The real Crane had been called to Europe, no doubt, for several important missions—and one of these was to see that the girl he had saved from the green car—from this very man, in fact—was prevented from making any trouble. He was to act, indeed, as her “protector.” What irony!

“Judith tells me——” he started.

“Judith?” repeated Svensson.

“Well, that’s her name, isn’t it? At least, it’s what you called her.”

“We won’t press the point,” conceded the other. “You want to know where the girl can be found, no doubt?”

“If I’m to do the job, I shall have to get into touch with her, naturally.”

“Of course.” The speaker crossed the room and seated himself at a bureau. He was just about to open a drawer when the loud peal of an electric bell rang through the room.

“Someone appears anxious to come in,” commented Svensson.

At that moment, Crane knew he was in real danger. So far, this man had been fencing with him. That had been obvious. But now the mask was partly off. Had that ring at the front door, or wherever it was, been a signal?

He half turned to the door.

"You're not going, Crane?" asked his host.

What could he say?

"If you've got people coming——" he fumbled.

"Oh, it's only a friend of mine—and a friend of yours, if it comes to that."

His brain was reeling. A friend of his? A friend of the real Crane's, that was. Then the masquerade would be exposed: he would be shown up.

"You really must not go," continued Stevenson; "I can't allow it. When an old friend like——"—he paused and smiled, and there was the very devil in his grin—"calls so unexpectedly, it would be churlish for you to leave. Stay there!" he snapped.

Crane waited no longer. He had been mad to come. But before he could reach the door, this opened, and a man appeared.

He stared at him in astonishment.

For this new-comer although some years older, and carrying a far greater air of sophistication, was the living image of himself!

FOR a moment there was a tense silence. Then this was broken by the sound of a laugh. Stevansson was expressing his satisfaction at the *dénouement*.

Crane no longer hesitated. A Rugby footballer, he was always fit ; and his speed must have startled the man at the door, for he made no adequate defence when the other rushed at him. Perhaps the presence of his double was totally unexpected ; in any case, the quick thud of fists against his face caused him to give ground.

One tug at the door, and with it flying open, Crane was half-way to the street. He caught a fleeting glance of the girl, Judith, staring at him from a doorway in the hall as he rushed past.

Before he could reach the main door, however, the manservant who had answered the bell barred the way. From behind came a snarling voice : Stevansson's.

" Stop him, Lessing ! Stop him, blast you ! "

The manservant darted a hand to the pocket of his immaculately fitting coat. But, even in the act of his drawing a revolver, Crane had performed a second crashing feat. The two went down amid a flurry of arms and legs. Confused as he was by his fall, Philip maintained his self-possession. Surprisingly enough, now that he was faced by the first real peril of his life, he remained astonishingly cool. Perhaps, he was able to reflect, his Rugby football was helping him out. He played scrum-half for Truro.

He was soon on his feet—and, when he stood up, the revolver he had snatched from the hand of the servant was menacing Svensson.

" Keep away ! " he shouted.

The two men and the woman at whom the words were directed obeyed.

His left hand fumbling with the door, he found the handle. One quick turn, and he was out on the steps of that solid-looking Bayswater house which he knew now to be the head-quarters of a dangerous gang of criminals.

A bang of the door, a few further flying footsteps, and he was in the street.

Chance now lent a hand. A taxi-driver, noticing his haste, looked at him inquiringly.

Philip gave the first address that came into his mind.

"Lyons' Corner House, Coventry Street," he said. And was away.

It was just as the taxi, caught fast in a traffic jam, had reached the brilliantly-lit Swan & Edgar's corner, that he saw her. The very girl! The girl he had dragged from beneath the wheels of the green car. What an amazing piece of luck! She was standing on the kerb only a yard or so away, staring straight in front of her.

Wrenching open the door of the taxi, he stepped out on to the pavement.

"*You!*" she said breathlessly, as he reached her side.

"Yes," he replied, adding quickly: "I've got a taxi here. I want you to come with me. To talk . . . Why, you're . . . ill!"

"I'm afraid," were the words that came trembling from her lips.

It was late—some time after midnight. But what did this new Philip Crane care? This was London, not Truro. . . . The prospect of escorting a woman he did not yet know passed into the orthodox. He put a hand on her arm, and she did not resist.

"Where now?" asked the taxi-driver in a surly tone. He had been afraid his fare was a bilker, and his temper had not fully recovered.

"Somewhere quiet," he was told; "some place where we can have a meal by ourselves and be able to talk without being overheard."

The mechanical Jehu chewed the end of a luxuriant moustache.

"W'ot you want is Cima's, Greek Street," he said. And made a swerve such as only a London taxi-driver could attempt with safety.

Five minutes later, a broad-faced *maître d'hôtel*, himself the proprietor of his little restaurant, was giving the couple a warm welcome.

"Somevair qui-et?" he repeated; "mais, oui; this way, monsieur."

He preceded them up a narrow flight of stairs, and into a small room on the right that was evidently reserved for small and essentially private dinner-parties.

"No one will come to you here, monsieur. And now——?"

"I leave everything to you."

Once they were alone, the girl turned to him with a quick, impulsive gesture.

"I don't think I ought to have come with you," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because—well, aren't you a perfect stranger?"

With a quickness that might have startled his Truro friends, Crane held up a humorously protesting finger.

"How can you say that?" he said; "this is the second time we've met."

The next moment he regretted he had uttered the words, because a shudder passed through the girl's slim body. Instinctively he put out his arm and drew her to him in a protective way.

"Yes," now came the faltering answer. "I'm sorry I . . . forgot. But I didn't mean it that way. I meant . . ."

"It doesn't matter," he said, "you're here, and I've been given a second opportunity of meeting you. Won't you be content with that?"

Looking up into his face, she nodded. And before another word could be uttered the waiter entered carrying the first course of the late supper.

Crane was developing observation. He noticed during the meal that the girl, in spite of her

evident fear, ate as though food for some time past had been a stranger to her. He wondered at it ; and, wondering, was given the explanation.

" This is the first meal I have had to-day," she said ; " if I am ravenous, you must forgive me."

He laid down his knife and fork and, reaching over the table, touched her hand.

" You can trust me," he said ; " I want to help you. I am determined to help you. Won't you tell me your story ? "

" All of it ? "

" Yes—especially the part which has made you afraid. But first of all drink another glass of wine." He filled her glass with Burgundy, and waited until she lifted it to her lips.

" More," he urged, " it will do you good ; bring back the colour to your cheeks."

It was with a little shaky laugh that she laid the glass down.

" I didn't think I should ever meet a man like you," she told him ; " I didn't believe there was one in the whole of London."

" But I come from Truro," he replied, hoping that the feeble jest would bring a second smile to her eyes.

" Truro ? That's in Cornwall, isn't it ? "

" Yes ; I came up to-day on a holiday."

Her face became blanched.

" You must go back," she said, " you must not stay in London—at least, you mustn't be seen with me."

" But that's all rubbish ! "

" No." And, this time, it was her hand which reached across the table. " It's a matter of life and death. You saw that for yourself this morning. . . . That man meant to kill me ! "

He wondered if he should tell her, and then decided that he would.

" London is a wonderful place," he said ; " you would scarcely believe me, I suppose, if I told you that, less than an hour ago I was talking to that identical person—at least, I believe him to be the same."

" Stevensson ? "

" Stevensson."

" But—how ? "

" I was taken to his house in Bayswater Road."

" By whom ? "

" A woman. Look here, suppose I tell my story first ? But are you strong enough to hear it ? "

" Yes—quite."

" A little more wine, then—and I will."

She took another deep sip of the Burgundy, and sat back in her chair.

" Stevensson is a criminal, I suppose ? " he started. " No, don't answer yet. Let me go on. Before I—met you to-day, I had asked the porter at the station to recommend an hotel. He told me of the Mid-Western and, because I didn't care tuppence where I went, so long as I was reasonably comfortable, I took his advice. Well, when I got there the most extraordinary thing happened ; I was taken to a private suite of rooms——"

" Are you so rich as all that ? " she asked.

" Rich ! " He laughed scornfully. " No, I'm not well off—just an aeroplane designer—and riches don't come the way of my kind. But I've just won a thousand pounds in a newspaper competition. That's why I've come up to London on a holiday."

" Then there was some mistake ? "

" I soon realised that. But the complete explanation didn't dawn on me until some time later. That was after the hotel clerk had given me three letters addressed to ' Philip Crane, Esq., Mid-Western Hotel, S.W.1. ' "

" I know," she put in quickly, " there was another Philip Crane."

He smiled at her.

" You see," he remarked jestingly, " how much good that wine has done you. Yes, you're right, there *was* another Philip Crane—a crook in the employ of the man Stevensson. By a most extraordinary chance this man who had crossed from America had reserved a suite of rooms at the Mid-Western Hotel. When I turned up I was taken for him."

" But the letters ? " asked the girl eagerly.

" They were written in some kind of code and, of course, were Greek to me. But that they evidently contained some instructions to the other Crane there was no doubt ; for when I got back to the hotel at ten o'clock to-night there was a woman waiting to see me—or, rather, the man I was supposed to be."

" That woman ! Describe her." There was a feverish excitement about the girl's manner now.

Wondering at her agitation, but anxious not to give her any further cause for worry, Crane hesitated.

But she persisted.

" Tell me," she said, " did she have wonderful red hair ? "

"Yes," he admitted, "as a matter of fact, she was quite a striking-looking person altogether."

A startling comment came from his companion.

"She works with those devils. . . . My poor father——"

CRANE rose and pushed away his chair.

"The rest of my story can wait," he said. "I'm anxious to know what is troubling you. Is it something to do with your father?"

"Yes," she admitted. Her confidence in him seemed to be increasing. "My father is in the power of Stevensson and his gang. He is not a criminal himself," she added quickly, "only he is weak, weak——" Her voice trailed off into a pitiful sigh.

He leaned towards her.

"Can't you tell me more than that? Don't you see I want to help you? There's a fate in this," he went on, "the real Crane was brought from America to look after you—amongst other things."

Her wide-open eyes reflected her astonishment.

"To look after me?"

"Yes. Apparently they think that you're dangerous—to their interests, of course. That's why Crane was given the job. Thinking it over,

I'm sure that they didn't mean to kill you this morning. The idea, no doubt, was to cause an accident, and then have you kidnapped. . . . By the way," he continued quickly, " why haven't you been to the police? They would help you."

She shook her head.

" I daren't."

" Why? "

" Because——"

Crane, although he controlled his feelings, began to feel impatient. What was the sense of all this secrecy? If her father was in real danger, the obvious thing was to go to Scotland Yard. He would do it himself. As the thought crossed his mind, he looked towards the door.

She appeared to understand.

" No—you mustn't," she cried; " it would mean ruin to my father—ruin and—*prison*." The last word was scarcely breathed, as though the thought of this disgrace was prostrating to her.

Crane kept silent. This was the strangest moment in his life. The room was curiously quiet. In this backwater just off Shaftesbury Avenue, they had both found sanctuary—that, at least, was how the situation appealed to him.

Outside, not more than a few yards away, seethed the turbulent life of London after midnight. In those crowded streets, perhaps their enemies—the foes of this girl and himself—might even now be trying to trace them. One thing was certain; he could not go back to the Mid-Western Hotel. They would be waiting for him there on the off-chance of his return.

There was also the problem of what to do with his companion. The urgency of this drove even the thought of Scotland Yard out of his head.

“ You mustn’t worry,” he said; “ don’t you see that it has all been arranged? The other Crane is an enemy, but I am *your* friend. It’s settled. With your permission, I am going to see this thing through. Perhaps I can even manage to get your father away from these men.”

“ It’s wonderful of you,” she replied, with a smile that made his heart beat quickly.

“ But, in the first place, you must be taken to a place of safety yourself. Are you staying at an hotel? ”

“ No—in lodgings. A street in Pimlico. But I’m afraid to go back there. The house has been watched for some days now. I’ve seen the red-headed woman outside. . . .”

"I must find you somewhere else. Unfortunately, I don't know London very well—this is only the third time in my life I've been here. I know," he added quickly; "we'll ask the proprietor. He looks honest enough—and he's a Latin. All Latins are willing to help a woman in distress. What do you say?"

"If you like. But I hate to give you all this trouble."

"Nonsense! This is the first time in my life that I have ever been able to do anything useful—outside of aeroplane engines, I mean—and you wouldn't believe how satisfying it is! Excuse me just a moment."

He went to the wall and pushed the bell. To the waiter who appeared he said:

"Tell the proprietor that I would like to speak to him, please."

The man, sleepy-eyed, waiting obviously for the order to clear, nodded gloomily.

As they heard his splay feet descend the stairs, Crane, although he had a strange sinking feeling himself, endeavoured to rally the girl again.

"Buck up!" he said; "we're going to beat these devils yet!"

But, although the words were uttered with

spirited determination, the only reply she could make was to shake her head.

"They are too powerful," Crane heard her whisper.

By this time the amply-girthed figure of the proprietor of Cima's appeared bowing in the doorway.

"Your pleasure, monsieur?" he asked.

"Come inside and shut the door," said Crane. He looked at the man and decided that he was as honest as could be expected; in any event it was a case of Hobson's choice; he had to take the chance.

"I am in a difficulty," he said, "and I want you to be good enough to help me out."

"Anything I can do, monsieur——" The rest of the sentence was completed with an eloquent movement of the expressive hands.

"My friend here"—indicating the girl—"has enemies in London. They are worrying her. Can you recommend me a place where she would be perfectly safe?"

Now that he had come to say it, the words sounded grotesque, but the restaurant proprietor, beyond lifting his shoulders a trifle, seemed to regard the request as being nothing out of the ordinary.

"That is quite easy, monsieur; I have a niece who is a Sister at the Convent of the Sacred Heart in Notting Hill Gate."

"Notting Hill Gate?" repeated Crane; "how far is that from here?"

"A taxi would get you there in a quarter of an hour."

"Can you give me a note?"

"With pleasure, monsieur." The speaker looked at the girl, who had been following the conversation with the deepest interest. "My niece is called Sister Faith. It is by that name you will ask for her. She will make you happy and comfortable, mademoiselle," he concluded; "of that I am sure."

"Oh, thank you." She had risen and held out her hand.

It was a moving spectacle to Crane to see this foreigner who made his living out of the cosmopolitan life of London, shaking hands gravely with the complete stranger he had volunteered to help. Nothing of that sort could have happened in Truro, he was sure; but, somehow, Truro seemed so far away now that he could not bridge the distance.

"I go now to write the note," M. Cima said.

"Thank you. And you might order a taxi, will

you ; here," added Crane, pushing a pound note into the fat hand, " is payment for the supper."

" You have given me too much, monsieur. There will be eleven and sixpence change."

" Let the waiter have it." He had never thrown away money with such prodigality in his life before, but he found it comparatively easy to imagine himself a Napoleon directing great schemes, commanding grave situations. It was exhilarating.

Philip turned away with a sense of deep thankfulness. Sister Faith had been all that her uncle had said of her. The girl—he didn't even know her name yet, he remembered—would be safe in the Convent of the Sacred Heart ; in that sanctuary none of her enemies could get at her.

And now—although this was an infinitely less important problem—what about himself ? What was he to do ? It was useless to attempt to go back to the Mid-Western Hotel. Svensson and the real Crane would be on the watch for him there.

He must leave London. In redemption of the promise he had made to the girl, it was necessary for him to get down to the Kentish village where she had told him, in that short ride

from Soho to Notting Hill Gate, she believed her father to be kept a prisoner.

The press of people in the streets was beginning to get on his nerves. He turned to the taxi-driver.

“ What’s the station for Kent ? ” he asked.

“ Charing Cross, sir.”

“ Drive me there.”

CHAPTER VI THE MIRACLE-WORKER

"WHO was that gink?" The question, asked in a strong transatlantic twang, made Simon Stevensson frown. He thrust his monocle into his right eye and stared at the speaker.

"I wish I knew," he said; "you noticed he was the living image of yourself?"

"There was some resemblance, sure," was the reply; "but, tell me, who is he? I don't fancy guys going round looking the dead spit of me."

"We'll have Judith in," said Stevensson, seating himself.

There was no need to summon the girl. Almost before the words had left his lips she had appeared in the doorway.

"So he got away," she commented in a bitter tone. The look she gave Stevensson was charged with contempt.

"Come in and shut the door," was the curt order; "and don't start any hysterics here, because I'm not in the mood for them."

"Not if The Empress knows about this?"

The taunt, hot-flung, brought a smear of scarlet to Stevensson's pale cheeks. But quickly he recovered himself.

"I seem to have the impression that it was you who brought the fellow here," he said; "and it will be you who will have to make the necessary explanation to The Empress."

"Can the talk," drawled the visitor; "let's get the works on this guy. At the present time, I don't know whether he's the Emperor of Siam, or Al Capone's newest brother-in-law. . . . Say, kid, where did you pick the gink up?"

Judith Felstead gnawed her lip. It was a bitter humiliation to know that it was she who had been responsible for this debacle. Of course, there had been extenuating circumstances. But The Empress was not the woman to listen to these.

"I'll tell you all I know," she said sharply. "I got orders from Stevensson to meet you at the Mid-Western Hotel to-night at nine o'clock. I was given your photograph and told that you would be in a private suite. I waited over an hour, and then a man came in who was so like you that I thought there could be no possible mistake. It's true he didn't speak with an American accent, but he explained that satisfactorily. And he said he'd just shaved off his

moustache. Oh, don't look at me like that!" she exploded; "how the hell do you think I could know he was a wrong 'un?" She swung round on Svensson. "What do you think he is? A dick?"

"What else could he be?" asked the other, with a frown that chilled the heart of the listener.

She stamped her foot.

"So much for your judgment," she said daringly, snapping her fingers; "that fellow's just a fool—no more a detective than I am!"

"Say, sister, how d'you make that?" asked the American.

"Isn't it easy?" she retorted. "Do you think if he'd been a detective, he'd have come here on his own? Why, by this time the house would have been raided. Scotland Yard don't leave much to chance."

"There's something in that," admitted Svensson.

"There's a hell of a lot in it," she went on, more confident now; "it's just one of those coincidences that the story-writers talk about. Nothing so very wonderful in it, after all, perhaps; Crane is a pretty common name in England."

"Yes," returned the American; "but it's a bit out of the ordinary for two fellows to be dead

ringers of each other, and to have the same name as well. Anyhow, we'll stop talking about that gink—for the time being at any rate. I want to go on to the Mid-Western ; I reserved a suite by wireless from the boat. Can you tell your piece in ten minutes ? ” he asked, turning to Stevansson.

The latter nodded.

“ Sorry this should have occurred,” he said ; “ but you can rest assured that it won't do you any harm. If you'll excuse me just one minute more, I am at your service.”

“ Certainly.” The visitor reached for the box on the desk and lit a cigarette. He waited patiently until Stevansson, whose voice could be heard telephoning outside, returned, occupying his time by casting appreciative glances at the flaming-haired beauty who, apparently, was to be an associate of his from now on.

Stevansson's voice was suave, but serious, as he re-seated himself.

“ You won't mind, Crane—especially after what has just happened—if I ask you to convince us that you really are the right man ? ” he asked.

The visitor seemed about to explode into an oath, but his anger suddenly melted into a smile.

“ Not at all,” he said ; “ here you are.” He

took a number of papers from a pocket-book and handed them to the other.

Stevensson, after examining them critically, passed them across to the girl.

"I don't think we need have any more doubt, Judith," he said. It seemed as though he was anxious, after the recent storm, to conciliate her.

The papers were quickly returned.

"No reason at all," she commented; and, as if to spread the propitiatory spirit, smiled across at Crane.

"Now we're all sitting pretty," said Stevensson, using an idiom with which he knew the visitor would be familiar, "the idea is this: The Empress—what a woman!—" he broke off to exclaim, "has made plans to flood Europe with false paper. The man she's got hold of—an Englishman called Ferguson—is the cleverest engraver that perhaps the world has ever known. He's kicking up just a little trouble at the moment, but we needn't bother about that. The Empress, as you've probably heard, has a way all her own when she wants a thing done.

"Where you come in, Crane, is this: directly the stuff is ready, you'll cross to the States and circulate these bogus notes throughout America. Not only that, but you'll establish head-quarters

either in Chicago or New York, whichever you prefer, and act as our distributing centre for that side. Now you know why The Empress sent for you. How does it appeal ? ”

“ O.K., if the stuff’s all right. It all depends on the craftsmanship of this fellow Ferguson. I needn’t tell you people that the police and the secret service people generally are very wide-awake now to ‘ bad ’ paper.”

“ This man can do miracles,” asseverated Svensson.

“ All right, I’ll take your word for it.” Looking at Svensson, the speaker was surprised to see a heavy frown gather on the man’s face.

“ Anything wrong ? ” he asked.

“ I don’t want to create any further bad feeling,” said Svensson, “ but you should have been at the Mid-Western Hotel at nine o’clock to-night.”

“ Yes, I know. But I was kept.”

“ Where ? ”

“ Southampton. I haven’t told you yet, but the boat was boarded by detectives, and I had the devil’s own job to get ashore. If I hadn’t found a friendly steward who lent me his clothes I should have been nabbed. I don’t know how it happened, but a description of me must have

been circulated and wirelessly across to the English police. I realised that all the trains for London would be watched, so I lay low in a poor part of the town, and eventually got away by automobile. I had to pay that steward two hundred dollars—but it was worth it. Anyway, that's my explanation for being late. And that's why I came straight here before going to the hotel."

"Hell!" cried Svensson, "this upsets things. The Empress sent several letters to you at the Mid-Western. They were all written in the code, but if that other fellow hands them over to the police there may be trouble. They've got some pretty sharp brains at Scotland Yard now, and although the code, as you know, is intricate, one can never be sure——"

"In that case, perhaps it would be better if I didn't go to the Mid-Western. I shouldn't say you need worry about those letters if they were written in the usual code."

"But I *am* worrying," repeated Svensson. "Too much was given away in them. You've heard what The Empress is—self-willed, impetuous, refusing to take anyone else's advice? Well, she would send those things. She said she wanted you to know exactly what was expected

of you from the start. But I have a cautious nature ; that was why I asked Judith to go along to see that you received them quite safely."

" I was waiting for you for over an hour," put in the girl.

" Sorry, sister. If I'd have known you'd been at the other end, I'd have squeezed the last mile out of that automobile."

With the words, he rose.

" What about that gink ? " he asked at the door.

Stevensson was quick in his reply.

" You've no need to bother about him," he said ; " you can leave that to me—he'll be attended to. That was what I telephoned about just now."

" And The Empress ? " asked Crane ; " when do I see her ? "

" I'll arrange something for to-morrow. Can you be here at ten ? "

" Yes—ten it is. Good night."

" Good night, Crane."

" Good night," added the girl.

When he had gone Judith made a comment.

" You didn't say anything about the girl ? "

" No," admitted Stevensson, " that fellow

strikes me as being weak in regard to women. That will be your department, my dear. . . . Going ? ”

“ It’s late, and I’ve got a call to make.”

“ Where ? ”

Judith Felstead drew near the man, and spoke tensely.

“ I shan’t be content,” she said, “ until I know that girl is still in her lodgings. If she saw you in the car to-day she may have become frightened and run away.”

“ She wouldn’t go to the police,” sneered Stevenson.

“ You don’t know what a girl will do when she’s really terror-stricken,” replied Judith. “ Anyway, I’m popping round to—where’s the address ? ”

The other took a small book from a drawer and flicked the pages.

“ 17A, Tadcaster Street, Pimlico,” he read out. “ But do you realise the time ? Calling there at this hour will only make her suspicious. Besides,” as though suddenly recollecting, “ there’s no need. Thompson has been watching the house.”

“ Then why doesn’t he ring up ? ”

“ He——”

"I guess that's him now," Stevensson concluded.

It was not until a minute and a half had passed that he returned to the room.

"There's hell to pay over this," he said tensely, "the Ferguson girl has met the other Crane. Thompson's been shadowing them all night. Crane picked her up at Piccadilly Circus, went with her to Cima's in Soho and, after that, took her to a convent-place in Notting Hill Gate."

"She must have told him the story," interjected Judith.

"Yes. And this means that she'll be safe. We shan't be able to get hold of her. You can't rush your way into a convent."

"She can write letters though. Do you think she's been with that man all the evening without telling him something? Where did he go after he'd left her at the convent?"

"He went back to the West End. Thompson lost sight of him there. There's a chance he may return to the Mid-Western."

"That's not very likely."

"Well, anyway," continued Stevensson, in a tone of deep annoyance, "I've got three men out searching for him."

"Doesn't sound very hopeful."

"Damn you, don't be so pessimistic! It was your fault from the beginning; you ought to have been able to tell the difference between a swell crook and a simpleton."

"Easy enough to talk. And I'm tired. Good night."

Stevensson softened.

"It's all right, kid," he said, "don't you worry. I was a bit hasty just now, I know." He put out his arm as though to draw her to him, but she evaded the attempted caress and walked swiftly away.

The banging of the door coincided with the curse which fell from Stevensson's lips. His thin, ascetic face was flushed with anger—and when Simon Stevensson was angry it boded no good-will to anybody concerned.

CHARLES WHITTLE was very comfortable. The well-padded leather chair, drawn up not too near the cheerfully blazing fire, commanded a view of the entrance to the Washington Hotel lounge. Without turning his head he could see everyone who entered or left. This was a favourite occupation of Whittle's, for his profession in life was to study his fellow-creatures—some more than others.

Although a detective—or, perhaps, because of it—Whittle had developed a preoccupation with his immense subject that would have been an asset to any novelist. People interested him, apart altogether from his business. The contemplation of human nature was the most absorbing hobby that any man, in his opinion, could have.

The time was 11.20. He had just finished the one large whisky and soda which he permitted himself at the close of each day—whether he was

in his own country or travelling abroad. His cigar was burning evenly, he was comfortable in body, and his mental worries were not too numerous. True, he had not yet gained any success in the quest which had brought him to Europe; but that matter could wait. Of an enviably philosophic turn of mind, Whittle encouraged the optimistic view that if to-day was a failure, to-morrow might prove a success.

When the New York Bankers' Trust had sent for him and explained this new job, he had welcomed the commission. New York had been insufferably hot for some weeks through an Indian summer, and the prospect of a trip across the Atlantic was extremely pleasurable. Moreover, London was his favourite city—although a hundred per cent. New Yorker, he never failed to yield to the lovable and leisurely charm of England's capital.

Just before he had ordered his customary night-cap, he had been glancing through the pages of an evening newspaper. Though far less sensational in tone, and containing fewer pages than the journals of New York, he had found it very interesting to read. Especially congenial to his present mood was a leaderette.

Picking the paper up again he re-read the short article :—

London—here is the city incomparable, the town lovable, all the leisure and friendliness and good fellowship and humour in the world. Here are restaurants which are family dining-rooms, where everybody knows somebody, and the maître d'hôtel knows all ; here are the austere rooms of supper clubs, where you may sit and receive the comfort of music and movement, the occasional beauty of face and figure, and a fresh Englishness that comes to you like a whiff of lavender.

London gives you the glory of history in grim, grey stones, towering spires and ancient cloistered quietness ; the comfort of living amid millions of people working for their living, being amused at the least excuse, and going out of their way to find an excuse. . . .

The best town in the world !

The best town in the world ! Well, he wasn't going to quarrel with that description. No, sir !

Whittle, a man of fifty-five, who had been engaged in secret inquiries for many important

business organisations during the last twenty years, had visited London on several previous occasions ; but his present mission was, perhaps, the most important he had yet undertaken. His employers, a committee representing the heads of all the most influential banking houses in New York, had recently received information to the effect that, somewhere in Europe, a gigantic conspiracy to manufacture counterfeit money had been, or was about to be, launched. The news naturally enough had given the bankers considerable anxiety, and it was a great compliment to Whittle that he should have been chosen as the man to go to Europe to endeavour to ascertain how much truth there might be in the rumours.

" Please understand," Benjamin P. Jordan, the head of the Trust had told the detective, " that we are relying absolutely upon you. We shall give you credentials which will enable you to ask for the co-operation of the police in any country you visit. Up till now we have not spoken about this to the ordinary authorities because we wish the preliminary inquiries to be made as quietly as possible. We do not forget what you have done for us in the past, Whittle, and we are convinced that if anyone

can get to the root of this matter, you are the man. Good luck to you ! ”

He had now been in London for over a week, had made such inquiries and investigations as his natural acumen and experience had indicated, but had drawn a blank. It seemed highly probable that the story of this new gang of forgers would prove to be nothing more alarming than a sensational canard.

It was peculiar about the fellow that night though, he reflected, relighting his cigar. He could have sworn it was Jim Birchall, amongst whose many aliases was the more aristocratic name of “ Philip Crane.” That was why he had shadowed the man. Birchall being in London promised things. But directly his quarry had turned he knew he had made a mistake ; although five years had passed since he had last seen Birchall, the man who had indignantly asked why he was being followed was an Englishman—there could be no question about that. Moreover, he was several years younger than Birchall could possibly have made himself out to be.

The detective puffed fiercely at his cigar.

If it had been Birchall. . . . Then, he told himself again, he would have had something to go

upon. Birchall he knew to be one of the cleverest men at present engaged in the various forms of swindling banks. His usual activities consisted in distributing the bad "paper" once it was manufactured.

But it was no good asking for the impossible. He would give the thing another week, and then, if he could not see an "end," he would get into touch with his employers, reporting his non-success to date and asking for further instructions.

More composed in his mind now, he returned to his favourite study of his fellow-creatures.

The room was filling fast. The crowds back from the theatre were occupying every seat and keeping the waiters busy with orders for drinks and light refreshments. For this was not one of the ultra-fashionable *caravanseirai* patronised by millionaires, but a thoroughly comfortable hotel of the middle-class description. Whittle believed in mixing with his kind. It was all right to pay a visit for business purposes to the Carlton, the Savoy, the Ritz, and other swell joints of that type, but he would have been supremely uncomfortable living in them.

He was just thinking about lighting a fresh cigar when he suddenly sat forward in his chair.

The next second, he had picked up the evening paper from the small table and had placed it before his face. This did not prevent him, however, from secretly scrutinising the man who walked through the room towards the big fire. Standing by the side of this, anyone could command a view of the whole apartment.

Whittle was used to surprises ; but, inured as he was in this particular, he yet felt a swift thrill of excitement. This small, under-sized individual with the shifty eyes he recognised. He had run across George Melton on the last occasion he had crossed swords with Jim Birchall. What was Melton doing in England ? He usually operated in the towns of the Middle West, not often venturing into New York, or even Chicago. And now he was in London . . . !

Working with Birchall ?

He lowered the paper quietly. Melton had not seen him yet. The man was standing only a couple of yards away, surveying the room with eager, questing eyes.

" Hello, George," drawled the detective.

The other turned swiftly. Whittle was an enemy—or had been an enemy. But the New Yorker was now smiling invitingly, and patting the chair by his side.

It was impossible to make a scene. After all, Whittle had nothing on him. There was no risk. Besides——

“ Well, well, well,” said the detective, when the other had accepted the invitation. The tone was markedly friendly. “ You’ll have something, George ? ”

Melton made a swallowing movement and scratched the side of his neck. He couldn’t “ get ” the situation yet.

“ Thanks,” he replied ; “ I’ll have a whisky.”

When the waiter had brought the order——“ two large whiskies—and not too much soda ”——Melton’s host took up the talking again.

“ What’s brought you to London, George ? ” he asked. “ Oh,” quickly, “ you needn’t be worried ; I’m here on a holiday, and I’m not looking for work.”

“ Even if you were,” retorted the other, with an uneasy smile, “ you wouldn’t frighten me. I’m out of the game now.”

“ Running straight, eh ? ”

“ Yes—and finding it damned hard, let me tell you.”

The detective raised his glass.

“ I helped you once, George ; and, if possible, I’ll help you again,” he said. “ What’s the trouble ? ”

The answer was succinct.

"Lack of dough," he said.

"Come over here to try to get some?"

"Yeah!" But the word was accompanied by a grim and ironical smile which Whittle knew to be significant.

"Got anything to tell me?" he asked, raising his glass again.

"Anything to tell you? I don't quite get that."

"I think you do, George." Then: "Is Jim Birchall trailing around?"

Too late, the crook endeavoured to control his features. That sudden expression of suspicion had given his secret away to his astute questioner.

"That's funny," he remarked.

"Perhaps," conceded the detective; "anyway"—taking a gamble—"I fancied I saw Jim in the West End to-night."

"The dirty swine," muttered the other beneath his breath.

Whittle glowed with satisfaction. Luck was with him. The "end" for which he had been waiting so long now appeared a possibility.

"Do you ever think of that night in Dallas?" he asked seductively.

Melton turned in his seat.

"I'm not telling you anything, mind," he whispered fiercely; "but if you care to go down to a village called Mandling——"

"I'll look it up on the map."

"No need to do that. It's in Kent. You go from Charing Cross."

"And who is at Mandling?"

"That's for you to find out. But I'll tell you this, Charlie Whittle: take a gun with you. There's a woman there——"

"A woman! Something new, eh?"

"Yeah, very new. You'll laugh when you see her; that is, if you get a chance to laugh before she plugs you. 'The Empress' they call her. God! The Empress . . .!"

Whittle took a third sip at his whisky and soda. Life had changed: it had passed from the prosaic to the stimulatingly exciting. Old campaigner as he was, his pulse was beating at a slightly higher rate than usual. The blood was thudding through his veins at a quicker pace. He was getting on a trail.

"That's all I want to know, George," he said; "and I won't forget it. Now, if you'll take my tip, you'll clear out of this town. You say you want money—here," taking a note-case from his pocket, "is a hundred dollars. That ought

to help you to where you're going. . . . Is it too inquisitive to ask you why you came here to-night ? ”

“ I was looking for someone,” was the non-committal reply.

“ Has this—person—turned up yet ? ”

“ No—and now he won't.” A hand raised the glass and set it down empty. “ Well,” he concluded ; “ I'll be pushing along. Good-bye.”

This was an unusual evening. Whittle signified it by calling for a third whisky—which represented two over his usual allowance. But there was matter for congratulation. George Melton had not been kidding him. Of that he was sure. The man had been sincere—for what reason he could not yet decide.

Of course, there were difficulties. These were represented in the two questions : (1) Why was Melton in London ? ; and (2) Why did he give the information ? There was yet a third query : What was going on in Mandling, that quaintly-named Kentish village ?

But there was this much to be said : Action promised.

“ Waiter ! ”

“ Yes, sir ? ”

" You have a Gazetteer here ? "

" Certainly, sir."

The book of reference, admirable as it was, was able to supply very little information. Beyond the mere mention that Mandling was a village of a few hundred inhabitants, and that it was near a castle famous for the fact that the knights who crossed from France with the intention of murdering Thomas à Becket, stayed there one night before proceeding to Canterbury, it had nothing to tell.

Ah, well, he would be there the next day. There was not long to wait.

Whittle had just closed the book when a commotion was heard in the hall of the hotel thirty yards or so away.

There came a sinister cry : "*Murdered !*"

The mind of a crime investigator has to work quickly. Whittle bounded out of his chair and forced a way through the press of people. A sudden fit of apprehension had seized him.

The sight outside confirmed his worst suspicions. On a leather lounge a man's body had been placed. There was an ominous stain at the base of the neck. A police constable was conversing in low tones with the manager of the

Washington, and a crowd four-deep watched in awed silence.

“ What’s happened here ? ” Whittle asked his neighbour.

“ Looks as though the poor chap’s been shot,” was the reply ; “ I heard the policeman say he was dead, anyway.”

The American detective gave a non-committal grunt. But his mind was very active.

He had recognised the dead man immediately
It was George Melton . . . !

HE stumbled weakly towards the door, this man who had been a prisoner for the past week. Faint through want of food, his nerve broken by actual physical torture, George Ferguson would have excited the pity of any observer.

His manner was distraught ; several times during the previous hour he had wondered if he were going mad. His actions now were those of one whose brain was rapidly becoming unbalanced. Clawing at the door until the blood oozed from his broken finger-nails, he kept up a continual cry :

" Let me out ! Let me out ! "

It seemed as though Fate had decided to answer the appeal, for the door suddenly opened. Ferguson, unable to save himself, sagged forward ; but, before he reached the floor, his body was caught in a pair of strong arms.

" Now then—pull yourself together, you fool ! You're wanted."

Resistance was out of the question ; he could

only obey the command by shuffling feebly forward as the other held his left arm in a vice-like grip.

Down the broad staircase, skirting a wide hall, at the other end of which could be seen the heavy front-door of the house, the two went. Outside a room on the right his guard halted to tap lightly on the door.

"Come in," said a cultured voice.

The prisoner might well have deluded himself that he was merely dreaming this scene and not living it. Even in this age of sensational crime, what ordinary person would have credited his story?—that he had been kidnapped in broad daylight, taken to a country-house in Kent, and there kept a prisoner by a gang of crooks who, through him, were intending to gather a harvest of several million pounds?

"Come on," ordered his captor again.

He was hustled into a large, pleasantly-furnished room. The initial impression was one of comfortable ease. On the hearth, a wood fire blazed; at a table sufficiently near for the warmth to be appreciated, sat two people.

It was the woman at whom Ferguson stared. Fashionably dressed, she might have been taken,

at first glance, for the usual Mayfair matron, whose hours were crammed with social engagements. She had good looks to commend her, and a *soignée* air. This much, the casual observer would have noticed.

It was not until one looked closer that it was realised that this woman was very different from others of her class. There was a cold callousness in her eyes, a fixed determination about her firmly-moulded chin, and a suggestion of cruelty in her tightly-closed mouth.

Ferguson felt his knees give beneath him. It was only the second time he had faced her, but he knew this woman to be a terrible creature. A remorseless, devouring monster. She, surprising fact though it might be, was at the head of the gang who were determined to break his will.

"Well, Ferguson, I hear you are still proving obstinate." The conversation was started.

He moistened his dry lips.

"How long are you going to keep me here?" he demanded.

"So long as we require your services, my man."

"But you can't do that!"

"Can't we?" The sneer was palpable.

"We appear to be doing it. Now, listen to me,

Ferguson : you'll stay here until you finish the work which is required. That's quite clear, I hope ? "

The words stunned him. He knew the woman to be speaking the truth. He had already proved her to be implacable.

" You are the one man in the world we need at the moment," she continued ; " no other engraver (that we know of, at any rate) possesses your ability. If there was such a man, we might get him to help you."

The man with the ascetic face seated by her side smiled at this pleasantry ; and it was he who now continued the talking.

" Be sensible, Ferguson ; if not——"

The sentence was completed by the woman.

" —If not," she said, " there is your daughter, of course."

A gasping cry came from the throat of the tormented man. He flung himself forward.

" Leave my girl alone, damn you ! " he cried ; and then : " Where is she ? Tell me ! "

Into the hard, but beautiful, face of the woman stole a smile.

" We are looking after her for you. Do what I want, Ferguson, and no harm will come to her."

He found courage of a sort. He believed this was an attempt at bluff ; Margery would be on her guard.

" I won't work any more," he stated.

" That will be very foolish of you." The speaker now pressed a bell, and, to the servant who appeared, said the one word :

" Badoglio."

Ferguson screamed. At the thought of that horrible Italian . . .

He was still cowering when a man of gigantic build entered the room. Swarthy-faced, his deep-set eyes glowed as he looked at the man whom he imagined was shortly to be delivered over to him.

" You sent for me, Empress ? " he asked.

" Yes, Badoglio. Our friend over there is being insolent."

Badoglio turned.

" Shall I see to him, Empress ? "

" In a minute, perhaps. . . . Now, Ferguson, this is my last word : You get to work on those new designs, or Badoglio will give you a little more of his attention . . . Paugh ! " she added ;
" the fool has fainted."

Simon Stevansson turned to his superior.

" With all possible respect, Empress," he said, " we must not allow the fellow to die. And, don't forget, his heart is weak."

" Die ! He won't die ! But his spirit must be broken. Time presses. He must get busy. When he comes to, I don't think he'll make any more difficulties. And now, I must get back to town. You'll stay here, of course. By the way, what about that girl of Ferguson's ? "

Stevensson parried with the truth. The Empress was not in the mood to hear disagreeable news.

" Thompson is keeping an eye on her ; there'll be no trouble in that direction," he replied. " The man, Crane, wanted to come down here this morning," he added quickly, " but I thought it best to fix up an appointment at your house."

" Quite right. What time did you say ? "

" Six o'clock."

She looked at her jewelled wrist-watch.

" I must hurry, then."

Tall, beautifully proportioned, regal, majestic, she made an impressive exit.

Stevensson lit a cigarette. Daring crook that he was, he was lost in complete admiration of this woman under whose banner he had enlisted.

Although, for the past twenty years, Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair—the name by which Mayfair Society knew her—had made a vast yearly income through crime, she had never been arrested. She was a born organiser ; a woman of extraordinary brain power, she was paid large sums to plan *coups* for various criminal gangs. That had been her living until five years ago. Then, deciding that she would enter business on her own, she had enlisted the services of three or four specialists. One of these had been Stevensson himself.

The smoker smiled as he recalled the really extraordinary position the woman was now in : Respected by the world whilst living her existence in the West End of London—an existence which appeared to be entirely above reproach or suspicion—she was yet known to the underworld as the greatest woman criminal of her generation. How long her luck would last, he could not tell ; but, when the climax did arrive, he knew it would provide a tremendous sensation. Would he be there at the finish ? He shrugged his shoulders at the reflection. In any case, at the moment, he was well placed : in the confidence of The Empress, he obeyed her orders and reaped a rich personal harvest.

His complacency was somewhat disturbed by the knowledge that he had withheld certain vital information from his Chief that morning. He had done so for two reasons: the first was a sense of protective loyalty to Judith Felstead, but he had also been actuated by fear.

What The Empress would say if she learned the truth he did not know ; but he had impressed upon Crane, the American, the desirability of saying nothing about the contretemps which had occurred the night before.

Back in the room which constituted his prison, Ferguson battled his way slowly back to consciousness. But when recovery came, he wished that he might have remained in complete oblivion.

Margery !

Was that damnable woman deceiving him, or had his daughter really fallen, like himself, into these devils' hands ?

“ Well, which is it to be ? ”

Looming over him, and grinning obscenely, Badoglio asked the question.

His strength was gone, his resolution beaten down. How could any man, tortured as he had been, hope to put up a fight ?

"Leave me alone," he pleaded.

"You shall have food and drink—those are my orders," replied the Italian; "and, when you are rested, work. You understand?"

Feeling utterly exhausted, the prisoner nodded.

CHAPTER
IX

THE KNIGHT-
ERRANT

THE dawn was just breaking when Philip Crane arrived at his destination. The village of Mandling—the girl had not been able to give him any more information than that—proved a small but picturesque hamlet a few miles inland from Folkestone.

Philip had taken so long in getting to the place because the first train from Charing Cross had not left for several hours. This monotonous period he had spent in the waiting-room of the station.

His first object, upon reaching the outskirts of the village, was to endeavour to obtain food. Breakfast was very urgently indicated.

Walking up what appeared to be the main street, he noticed a bulging-fronted, cheery-looking inn. Even in that unprepossessing light it seemed to hint at Dickensian comfort.

A youth, dressed in breeches and sleeved waistcoat, was busy cleaning the lattice windows.

"Are you open yet?" asked Crane.

"W'ot d'you want?" inquired the youth.

"Some breakfast," grinned Crane.

"The missus'll see to that," was the reply, accompanied by a backward flick of the thumb; "she can cook bacon a treat!"

Accepting the invitation, Crane walked across the sanded step and came into what evidently was the lounge of the inn.

Behind the counter was a red-cheeked, twinkling-eyed, stoutish woman of late middle age. From the first glimpse, Philip decided that here was a woman born to keep an inn.

"'Morning," she said cheerily.

"Good morning," replied Crane, feeling that the world was all the better for the presence of such an optimist; "sorry to trouble you so early, but is it possible to get some breakfast here?"

"Lord's sake, yes, young man!" came the quick answer; "sit you down and tell me what you require."

"Oh, anything—so long as it's hot! And quick," he added; "bacon and eggs would do splendidly."

"Tea or coffee? You can have either, you know."

Crane was surely tempted to blurt out : " God bless you ! " but restrained himself.

" Coffee, then," he substituted.

Already a fire was burning in the grate, and he drew up a wooden arm-chair and seated himself by it.

" Perhaps you'd be liking a bit of a wash ? " now asked the Good Samaritaness.

" By Jove, I would," he said ; " I've come by train all the way from——" And then he broke off as he remembered that he was in enemy country.

Still smiling broadly, Mrs. Hamble—for this the innkeeper vouchsafed was her name—conducted him into a bedroom on the first floor, and brought a large copper can full of hot water.

" There's soap and a clean towel on the rail, sir," she announced.

It was whilst he was descending the stairs that Philip made his decision. If the unravelling of the mystery upon which he had embarked necessitated his remaining in Mandling, what better lodging than this ?

Mrs. Hamble served the meal herself. At the sight of the dish of appetising eggs and bacon, supplemented by a mound of crisply fried potatoes, Philip rubbed his hands.

" Jolly good, Mrs. Hamble," he remarked.

The landlady beamed.

" There's nothing to beat eggs and bacon for breakfast, young man," she said, with her pleasantly maternal air; " and I know where those eggs came from—out of me own backyard. Now sit you down and eat it while it's 'ot."

Noticing the provider of the feast hovering in the middle distance, as though she would welcome the opportunity for a further chat (no doubt life in the village of Mandling was rather dull for a woman of her intelligence), Philip smiled across.

" I'm really on holiday," he announced, " and a friend of mine told me about Mandling. Said it was the best place he knew to come to for a few days' rest."

" What might your friend's name be—and yours, if it comes to that ? "

There was no offence in the question ; it was merely that the speaker was interested.

" My name's Padden," he replied. A lie, but in the circumstances he decided it was necessary. And, after all, it was not so far from being the truth—his uncle's name was Padden, and he supposed he could have the loan of it for a day or so.

It was easy to go from one lie to another,

although he was sorry to deceive so excellent a person as his present interrogator.

"And my friend's called Smith," he added.

"There's a lot o' them in this part o' Kent," returned Mrs. Hamble quite seriously. "And where did you think o' putting up, Mr. Padden, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"Here—if you'll have me."

"There's another public-house at the end of the street."

"I don't want to see it," he said; "I didn't believe there was such an inn as this left in England. What about it, Mrs. Hamble?"

Placing her hands on her ample hips, the landlady broke into a chuckle.

"Well, seeing as how you're so determined, Mr. Padden—would that room I showed you just now do?"

"Splendidly. I'll take it, in any case, for three days." Remembering that he had no luggage, he pulled out his pocket-book and took out two one-pound notes.

"Here's something on account," he said. "And is there a general store, or anything like that, in Mandling?"

"There's what we call 'Harrods.' Of course, that's a joke, as you may say; but old Tom

Cartwright sells practically everything there is."

"Good! Then from this very moment, Mrs. Hamble, I become your new lodger. That's understood."

"You seems one who likes a joke, Mr Padden."

Tom Cartwright wore a shapeless hat, had spectacles fastened with string about his ears, a shirt that was not above suspicion, and a certain hostility of manner. But when it came down to supplying things, he lived up to Mrs. Hamble's recommendation. So far as Mandling's wants were concerned, Sir Woodman Burbridge had nothing on him.

Philip was able to purchase a suit of pyjamas and a few other essentials of the toilet, including a toothbrush and a comb. He increased his haul to the extent of some handkerchiefs and collars, and then, with the small parcel under his arm, he felt he was able to look the world once again squarely in the face.

Leaving his package on the chest of drawers in his bedroom, he ventured out again. So far as he had been able to gather, Mandling did not hold more than a few hundred inhabitants.

Scattered here and there about the district were several more or less imposing residences, and perhaps it was in one of these that the girl's father was being kept a prisoner.

Strolling down the main street again, he broke off to the right and, climbing a stile, found himself on the edge of a patch of woodland. It was an exceedingly pleasant spot and, seating himself on a big boulder, he lit his pipe and gave himself up to reflection.

This was a quixotic mission upon which he had started, but now that his blood had cooled and he was able to see things in a more or less reasonable perspective, he knew himself still determined to carry on. There could be no doubt about the sincerity of the girl he had helped the previous night. Every word she uttered, every glance she had given him had been eloquent of the truth. And she was alone—utterly, completely alone. Worse still, the father on whom she, in the ordinary way, would have depended, was being held to some kind of ransom by a gang of criminals. The information she had given him during the short ride from Cima's to the convent had consisted of short, fragmentary sentences all jumbled together, and, without the details he had personally gained, they might have been quite

meaningless, apart from the one vital word: Mandling.

It was difficult to realise that, in this dreaming country-side, he had arrived at the heart of the conspiracy. In London, yes; in the teeming metropolis anything was possible. But here——!

What was this gang? And for what reason were they holding the man? There had not been time to ask the girl this vital question, with the result that the only information he had gained was that her father was being used for some definite criminal purpose.

His thoughts switched. He recalled his uncle, Sir Timothy Padden, that man whose visions were wide, but whose actual world was bounded by aeroplane engines. He smiled as he pictured the comment his uncle would have made on being told about his mad enterprise.

“Fudge and nonsense, lad; fudge and nonsense! If this man’s in trouble, go to the police, sir.” Sir Timothy was at least fifty years behind the times in his language and manners.

Fudge and nonsense! Perhaps it was. Any practical man of affairs would not have taken all this trouble upon such slender grounds. The most he would have done would have been to go to Scotland Yard on behalf of the girl.

A fool? Maybe. But, still, he had given his word.

Which reminded him : he must get information—as much information as was possible—about the occupants of each big house in the district. With this resolve, he started to walk back to the inn.

“ The Jolly Sailor ” had been washed and scrubbed and, it seemed, folded and ironed by the time he reached it. Mrs. Hamble and the one servant—a native of Mandling, as bright-eyed as her mistress—had put in some effective scouring since breakfast-time. And, with the work done, the landlady was willing to rest awhile and exchange comments on what, to her, passed for the day’s events.

Philip tried her out cautiously.

“ Who lives about here ? ” she repeated ; “ well, that’s easy enough to answer. Up at ‘ Rose Mount ’ there’s Sir Geoffrey Godfrey, who’s a big tobacco man, I understand, somewhere in London ; at ‘ The Larches ’ there’s Mr. Benjamin Quilter, who has a brewery business down at Ashfield. At ‘ Cedar Crest ’ there’s——” And so on and so forth.

It was not until six houses and their occupants

had been gone over that Philip felt he was getting somewhere near his quarry.

Then :

“ Up at what they used to call ‘ The White House ’ there’s someone by the name of Stevensson—I think . . . ”

Stevensson ! Of course it might be merely a coincidence, but he had to hear more.

“ And what does Mr. Stevensson do ? ” he inquired, with the best attempt at joculariry he could assume.

“ Some say he’s a gentleman of private means, but not much is known about him. A thin-faced, severe-looking gent he is. Don’t take much interest in the village life. But, there, it isn’t every rich man from London who wants to be bothered with such paltry fry as we folks. He doesn’t live here all the time—just comes down now and again. I have heard tell that he’s got a funny sort of a manservant up there—a big foreigner, with a nasty-looking face—but I dare say that’s a bit exaggerated : you know what village people are, perhaps, Mr. Padden ? They can’t abear a foreigner, anyhow, and it often happens that tales are spread about when, perhaps, there’s no call for ’em, if you follow me ? ”

“ Quite, Mrs. Hamble. Is it much of a walk up to this ‘ White House ’ ? ”

“ A tidy step, sir. But if you was intendin’ to do it, you could get there an’ back nicely by lunch-time.” There followed a detailed description of the route to be taken, concluding with the remark : “ And they do say there’s not a prettier bit of country anywhere in Kent than between this village an’ ‘ The White ’Ouse.’ Mind you take the second turning to the right after the cross-roads.”

ALTHOUGH affecting merely a casual interest, Mrs. Hamble's information excited Philip to such an extent that within ten minutes he was out of the inn again, and walking rapidly in the direction of the house which, he was convinced, held the secret he had come to Mandling to solve.

He went cautiously, hat pulled well down over his eyes, and looking continuously to left and right. This might be a quiet English village, but devilry lurked there. The forces of evil were encamped in the midst of this beautiful solitude, and he must not forget that, through the encounter of the night before, he was already a marked man. The remarkable resemblance he bore to the American crook this gang had enlisted increased the danger of his position.

The landlady's description had been so accurate that there was no chance of his missing the way. As she had said, the walk was delightful; he could well believe that some of the finest views

in the whole of Kent were those which met his gaze from time to time.

But his mind was too occupied with the present problem to allow itself to be distracted by Nature, however beautiful. There was a mental vision firmly fixed in his brain: a girl with fear-stricken eyes looking at him over a table in Cima's restaurant.

Three-quarters of an hour's walk brought him within sight of a large rambling house which he knew must be his destination. The owner of this residence was evidently not willing to take any chance with possible burglars. The house itself stood well back and was surrounded by a high wall, formidably spiked at the top, whilst the heavy iron gates seemed impregnable.

Realising that he was probably visible to anyone looking out from the upper windows—and, in the circumstances, there might well be watchers—Philip hid himself behind a tree before settling down to scrutinise the place seriously.

What he hoped to see he could not tell, but a kind of morbid fascination kept him there. Sooner or later he was going to get into that house and find out what it contained. For the present he was content to take in every detail,

to estimate what chances he had of success, and generally to spy out the land.

The wait seemed interminable—and, after the first ten minutes, ridiculous. No sign of life came from the house ; it might have been shut up for any evidence of occupancy. But just as he was thinking of moving on he espied a figure outside a window on the ground floor, looking straight across to the spot where he himself stood. It was a considerable distance but Crane, who had sharp eyes, realised that, if this man was not the Simon Stevansson he had met the night before, he bore a very close resemblance to that master-crook.

Philip felt his heart beating rapidly. Here was tangible proof. The girl had been right—and now the rest was up to him !

Afraid to move lest his presence be detected by the watcher he waited until Stevansson—if it were he—had gone back into the house. Then, gripped by a rising tide of excitement, Philip cautiously returned the way he had come.

Nothing could be done in the day-time ; he must wait until night. And the attempt would be made directly it was dark—on that he was determined. Delay might be dangerous. This man they held as a hostage could be murdered.

. . . He himself could not be content until he had discovered the girl's father and brought him away to safety.

His discovery gave him an added appetite for his lunch. But immediately afterwards, on the plea that he had several letters to write, he went upstairs to his room. But for the fact that it might have occasioned doubt in that excellent soul's breast, he would have asked Mrs. Hamble not to mention that she had a lodger. For it was obvious that his presence in Mandling must be kept a secret. Perhaps he had already been too incautious. The gang might have their spies out. Had he been seen that morning? Well, he would have to risk it.

The afternoon dragged wearily. He came down to tea at five o'clock, but immediately returned to his room. Evening-time would mean a constant stream of custom at the inn. Rustic eyes were sharp, and yokels were very prone to gossip. If Mrs. Hamble could be believed, the Mandling natives were especially gifted in this direction.

The thought occurred to him as he set out that never in the history of adventure had

anyone fared forth on a perilous expedition so inadequately equipped. He had no weapon—nothing but his bare fists. Come to that, he had never used anything that might come under the description of “lethal” in his life; he wouldn’t have known how to fire a revolver had he possessed one; whilst as for a knife—that was unthinkable. The question in these circumstances was how he would get on even if he managed to enter a house that was probably closely guarded. Time must decide.

A few minutes’ more walking brought him to the inevitable query: should he have invited the co-operation of the police? But there were two obstacles to this. The first, and most important, was the recollection of the girl’s reply when he had put to her this same question: she dared not go to the police, she had said, for that would mean disgrace to her father. Secondly, he did not suppose the standard of intelligence in the Mandling police force would be of too high a quality. He could picture the scene: a village constable staring at him in amazement. The “quality”—which meant, in a generic sense, anyone who lived in some style—to be under suspicion! . . . His story would not only be treated with contempt, but he would be placed

under direct suspicion himself. It therefore led up to this: what had to be done, he must accomplish on his own.

Although the time was only a little after seven o'clock, the village was deserted. The inhabitants of Mandling evidently went to bed early or kept indoors. He did not meet a single soul during the long walk to "The White House."

Now that the decisive moment had come, or was approaching, he began to realise the difficulties of the position. That house would possibly contain a number of men, and these he would have to tackle single-handed. That was after he had got into the place—which represented a distinct problem in itself. He remembered reading in sensational crime stories about crooks guarding their residences by secret electric appliances. Were those spikes at the top of the wall charged with some potent current? If so, might be killed—and instantaneously, at that.

Dismissing this pessimistic thought, Philip began to skirt the grounds. There might possibly be a weaker spot to attack round at the back.

It was whilst he was cautiously proceeding—for it was almost pitch-black by this time—that he noticed a light suddenly spring to life in an upstairs window of the house.

The next moment he was startled to see two figures locked in what appeared a fierce struggle. He watched, fascinated, for some time. Then the closure came ; the light faded ; what might have been a cinema picture was blotted out, leaving only darkness behind.

It was at this minute that Crane felt conscious, for the first time, of some presence near him. He realised that this was something more than a mere tightening up of his nerves ; it was an actual shape hovering close at hand. Where, he could not decide ; all around him stretched the blackness which had now become practically impenetrable. But that warning of the sixth sense which comes to a man when he is in danger, repeated its message.

He turned quickly, but nothing happened. Beyond a faint rustling to the right—and this might easily have been caused by the gentle night wind—there was no corroboration of his presentiment.

The sound had quickly died down. A tense silence now reigned. But Crane knew it to be the hush of fear. They must have sent a spy out ; the man was near at hand.

He prepared himself for an attack. Yet the seconds passed uneventfully. This was more

trying than an actual fight ; perspiration broke out on his forehead ; he felt his nerves cracking ; and then, just as the suspense became unbearable, from just behind, a twig snapped as though a human foot had passed over it.

Without hesitation he rushed towards the spot. Action was the only thing which could relieve his feelings. His groping arms closed round a man's body, he heard a startled curse, and then all his faculties were occupied in the task he had taken in hand : the struggle for life which ensued.

The other had the greater weight, but he was the more supple. This was soon shown by the manner in which he was able to wriggle away from his opponent's grasp. But in eluding the attack his foot slipped and he went sprawling. Instantly his foe was on him, ruthless hands about his throat. . . .

If Philip, in spite of his sedentary work, had not always made a fetish of physical fitness, the end of the struggle would have come then. With that intolerable weight on him, he felt the reath being slowly forced out of his body.

gritting his teeth, he battled back, and, raging to get on to his side, he rammed a re into the other's stomach and had the satisfaction of hearing him grunt in dismay. Then,

putting forth all the strength he could summon, he contrived to free one arm.

That was sufficient. Blow after blow he rained at the whitish blob which was the man's face. He heard the other beginning to breathe stertorously—this was heavy going for a man of his weight. Then, with a superhuman effort, Crane struggled free, and, with a last, final spending of strength, swung a terrific blow. His opponent, who had risen gaspingly to his feet, went down with a thud—and, once down, stayed there.

Pausing only sufficiently long to regain his breath, Philip bent over the prostrate body. But the darkness was still so intense that he had to strike a match.

Whilst he shielded the flame with one hand cupped, he muttered in astonishment : the man he had knocked out was the fellow who had shadowed him in London the night before, and who, when challenged, had turned away with some paltry excuse !

Who was he ? And what was he doing here ? One of two things suggested itself : either he was an outpost of the gang in the house, or, he had been watching the residence for a purpose of his own.

For a moment, he was afraid that he might have killed the man. The word "murder" rose up before him in all its grisly suggestiveness; but, as he started to fumble with the other's waistcoat, with a view to ascertaining if his heart was still beating, the patient groaned.

"Thank God!" muttered Philip. This adventuring into perilous ways carried its own penalties.

His sense of thankfulness was quickly cut short. From the house behind him, came a low, quivering cry of horror: a sound that might have been wrung from a man tight-gripped by a terrible fear—or, again, from one whose resistance had been worn down by physical torture.

Philip halted between two purposes. Should he wait for the fellow he had knocked out to recover consciousness, or should he risk everything in order to endeavour to get into the house? That cry might have been forced from the lips of the girl's father. He recalled the struggle he had seen in the upstairs room not long before, and was able to imagine something of what was occurring. The captive, perhaps, had made a desperate bid for freedom, had been overcome, knocked senseless, and, when he recovered consciousness, had been put to some

kind of torture. God! He couldn't stand by and allow that to go on.

Yet, as he started forward, he heard his patient move. His first duty, it now seemed, was to him. Perhaps he could get some valuable information from the fellow.

He struck another match, and by its light was able to see the man sitting up rubbing his face ruefully.

The next second, the light from an electric torch flashed full into his own face.

"Oh, it's you!" he heard; "young fellow, your punch is like a mule's kick. If my jaw isn't fractured in two places, then I'm a lucky devil! What in the hell made you start that fracas, anyway?"

Crane took his time in replying. All things considered, the other's tone was surprisingly good-tempered; but this generosity of spirit might be merely a blind in order to try to put him off his guard.

"Who are you?" he asked curtly; "and what are you doing here?"

The man addressed, rising lumberingly to his feet, chuckled.

"I might put the same questions," he said; "in fact, I might ask you a great deal more than that."

" Well, you won't get anything out of me, however long you take. Look here," continued Crane, feeling, somehow, that he was being made to look a fool ; " I want to know why you were following me about London last night ? "

The answer came with surprising quickness.

" Because I thought you were somebody else."

" An American crook named Philip Crane ? "

was the query.

" Say, young fellow, you seem to know a thing or two."

" I shouldn't be surprised." Two could play at this bluffing game. " You've not told me yet what you're doing here to-night," he persisted.

The man holding the torch seemed about to reply, when an astonishing thing happened : from the roof of " The White House " came a blinding glare.

" Hell's bells ! " Philip heard his companion exclaim ; " a searchlight ! They're leaving nothing to chance ! "

CHAPTER XI THROUGH THE GATES

“ QUICK ! Flat on your stomach ! ”

Recognising a leader's voice, Crane obeyed the injunction instantly.

“ They may have seen us, but I don't think so,” he heard the American say ; “ we were standing in this bit of woodland, remember. They've pinched that stunt from the gangsters. I wonder what's the idea ? ”

By this time, Crane had come to the realisation that the man by his side was more a friend than an enemy. Of course, much remained to be explained ; but, if the other was speaking the truth, he could not be regarded as a hostile force.

He did a little talking himself now.

“ Sorry I had to knock you down,” he said ; “ I thought you were a man from the house sent out to spy.”

“ Not on your life ! ” was the emphatic reply ; “ I'm a detective over from New York. And you ? ”

“ My name really is Philip Crane, and I'm not

a crook. I'm just an aeroplane designer come up from Cornwall for a holiday in London."

"Well, the rest can wait. We shall have a longer chat later on."

Crane was impatient.

"Look here," he said ; "is there any chance of getting into that house to-night ?"

"Not if you want to remain alive, I should say."

"That be damned ! There's a man in there who's being tortured—I heard him scream just now."

With the end of the sentence, the glare of the searchlight, after taking another long sweep, died down. Darkness encompassed them again.

"I feel exactly like you do, young man," said the detective, after a pause ; "and, unless I'm wrong in my guess, I have just as much interest in what's going on here ; but that danged searchlight shows they're on the watch. We must be careful."

Crane's blood was up.

"Careful ! When a man is possibly being murdered !"

He felt a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, there ; if you'd been in the crime

racket as long as I have, you'd know that nothing can be done impulsively. Are you staying in the neighbourhood?" the speaker broke off to ask.

"Yes. At a pub called 'The Jolly Sailor.'"

"That's going to be my hang-out, too, I expect. I was told about it, and hope to get fixed up to-night. In the meantime, I left my traps at the station. I'll tell you what, Crane: you just slip off to 'The Jolly Sailor' and wait for me there."

"No fear! If you're going to start anything, I'm with you."

"Hist!" came a sharp warning from the older man.

"What's the matter?" whispered back Crane.

The detective sidled down to his hands and knees, and motioned his companion to do the same.

"I thought I saw someone moving over there," he said, when they were both crouched.

"So much the better," was Crane's determined reply; "let's get at 'em. What we want is information—the best way to get in."

The other chuckled.

"All right: I'm game if you are. Follow me, and keep closely in touch."

On his hands and knees, the American began to move forward. As Philip followed his example, he remembered the Red Indian stories he had devoured as a boy—this was Hawk Eye, the Scout, brought up to date !

An uncanny business, though—not a game, but a desperately serious affair. He felt his hands being cut and scratched, and once put his palm on something slimy which slithered rapidly away.

“ Keep quiet ! ” The rebuke was hissed in a low, urgent tone by the man in front.

They had covered a dozen yards or so—a distance which, to Crane, had taken on the magnitude of at least half a mile—when the American in front came to a stop.

“ I must have been mistaken,” he said ; “ and yet—— I could have sworn I saw two figures standing just about here.”

“ Let’s stop this foolery,” said Crane crisply, straightening himself ; “ there’s only one thing to be done ; and that’s to get into the house.”

“ No,” was the stern rejoinder.

But Crane was not in the mood for delaying action any longer. Like so many quiet-living men precipitated into a dramatic situation,

he did not allow reflection to calm his blood.

"Wait, be damned," he said; "I'm going to get into that house; you can come if you like—if not, I'm going alone."

He turned away before the other man could catch his arm, and, breaking into a run, disappeared into the darkness.

"Silly young fool!" commented the American detective—and immediately started to follow. But in that deep gloom, it was impossible to see more than a few feet beyond one's nose.

As for Philip, he went dashing ahead in the direction of where he knew the back of the house must be. Here, if anywhere, might be a weak spot to attack. That the occupants of "The White House" were on the alert for a raid by possible enemies was proved by the recent working of the searchlight; but he did not allow this fact to weigh him down. His spirit was roused, and nothing, he determined, should stand in his way. That scream . . .

Racing with head down, he was suddenly pulled up with a painful jerk. He had caught his ankle in the uneven ground. Then he had a vivid sense of pleasure: a dozen yards away was

a huge gate that seemed to be composed of two parts. This, he decided, after a closer examination, was the means by which cars entered and left the grounds.

But, like the wall in front of "The White House," it was ornamented with deep spikes, and it would be a difficult job to clamber over them. Still, this represented an easier method of entry than the wall, and, putting his left foot on a raised piece of woodwork, he started to climb.

The next moment, however, he felt himself being jerked backwards, and, after the first bewildering surprise, he realised that the gates were opening outwards. He had to scramble quickly away to avoid being brushed aside.

He waited a development. This came in the form of a powerful motor-car which swept through the gate, driven at a rapid pace.

Now was his chance! He had listened anxiously for the voices of men, but none had come. This meant, he decided, that the gate was controlled by means of some mechanical device—probably electric, and operated either from the house or the garage.

It did not matter which method was used—the

gates were open, and he was going through them !

He got inside just in time. They swung backwards at such a rapid pace that he was almost swept off his feet.

Recovering himself, he started to move towards the light which glimmered fitfully through what must have been a deep belt of shrubbery. The thought did cross his mind that he would have been glad of the company of the fellow who had told him he was an American detective—but the chap had had cold feet, and there was an end to it : this was not a job for faint hearts.

Although he stepped as lightly as possible, he knew he was walking on a gravel path from the slight scrunching sounds made by his feet. To the right was a broad carriage way, evidently leading to the garage. But that must not be his route. Anyone from the occupied room might be able to see his figure ; his way would have to be through the shrubbery.

Stooping, he started to creep a way through the somewhat thick undergrowth. His face was scratched every now and then by thick twigs and what must have been holly leaves ; but after five minutes or so this minor purgatory was at an end. He stood on a piece of turf only twelve

yards or so away from the room which was his objective.

His pulse beat quicker as he noticed two or three figures outlined against the window. The curtains had not been drawn, and it was possible to look straight into the room. He had come so far that it was impossible to think of returning without having achieved some definite purpose. If he got close up to the window he might either hear some important piece of information, or perhaps—— The thought, mad as it was, crossed his mind of attempting to break the glass, leap into the room, pick up the prisoner—if there was a prisoner—in his arms and rush away with him, much after the fashion of a preposterous but exciting thriller which he had read in the train coming up from Truro.

There was this danger, however ; he had to cross that intervening space with the risk that anyone taking a glance out of the window would inevitably notice him.

Yet, if he got down on all-fours. . . .

Before he could start to crawl forward on this second portion of his journey, from somewhere behind a heavy form rammed itself down with terrific force upon his back. His face was pressed relentlessly into the hard ground. The

pain was intense—so agonising, in fact, that he was momentarily stunned and, during those few seconds of stupefaction, three merciless blows descended upon the top of his head, and he remembered nothing more.

STILL swearing beneath his breath, Whittle waited. It was useless, he decided, to attempt to rush through the gates which were rapidly closing. There must be men on the other side, although he had not been able to see them. He had only caught sight of a flying figure which he knew must be the young fellow who had said his name was Crane. The latter had got away with a good start, but he had been able to keep track of his movements by the sound the other's feet made in the silence of the night. One thing was certain; if Crane was captured he would probably be killed. Though he had no definite information about the occupants of "The White House," the hint which George Melton had given was sufficient for him; here was the headquarters of a gang of crooks who were as hard-boiled as they made 'em. That woman Melton had called "The Empress" wouldn't stop at mere murder.

He had come there for a certain purpose—and

this was strengthened now by the action of the young Englishman. Although he had tried to persuade Crane not to enter the grounds, he himself had resolved to get into the place by some means or other before the night was much older.

Waiting sufficiently long to endeavour to catch any sound coming from the other side of the gates, he took from his pocket what proved to be a light, pliable, silk ladder. He flung the top of this up so that it caught on two of the spikes of the gates. Then, swaying slightly, he mounted to the top, drew the ladder over to the other side, and descended in the same way.

There was a brief hesitation whilst he debated whether he should leave the ladder on the gate or replace it in his pocket. He decided on the first alternative. If pursued, he would be able to save in this way several valuable seconds.

Stepping remarkably lightly for a man of his build, he crept forward in the darkness, his right hand holding tightly a noiseless automatic. There were six bullets in that gun, and if he found it necessary he was prepared to use them all.

He had gone perhaps twenty yards, and was

fumbling to get clear of some kind of shrubbery into which he had stepped when he heard a voice, tense and dramatic, behind him.

"Come on, you fool! he's in front—I heard him."

Whittle's life had made him a quick thinker, and this faculty was considerably strengthened in an emergency. He did not require much mental churning to decide now that he had been mistaken in the darkness for a companion of the speaker. The latter, of course, must be one of the men placed in the grounds to act as guards to the house.

He whispered back in a strained voice :

"All right—I'm coming." He had to take the risk of his voice being something akin to that of the supposed second guard. If the first man evinced any sign of suspicion he would have to deal with him with his gun.

But, as it happened, the words were received with nothing more alarming than a peremptory :

"Well, don't waste any more time, then."

Stepping on his toes, Whittle moved forward. He had pulled his hat well down over his eyes, but either the clothes he was wearing, or his frame, must have been different from what the second man had expected, because when he was

within a couple of yards, the other started forward.

“ Hell—— ! ”

He said no more. Whittle, moving quickly forward, hit the man clean on the point of the jaw before any further words could escape. The blow was shrewdly aimed, and the fellow went down like a log.

The detective waited. There might be another near at hand. But no attack came. Instead, from somewhere in front, proceeded the sounds of a scuffle.

Crane being attacked? He moved forward rapidly.

Philip opened his eyes wonderingly. It was the American detective bending over him, and not an enemy.

“ How did you get here ? ” he asked slowly.

“ If you hadn’t rushed off like a young fool we’d have been together,” was the reply ; “ as it was, I found my way here by Luck—and she helped me like the lady she is. But there’s no time to waste talking—we’ve got to get away, my lad. How are you feeling now ? ”

Whilst saying the words, the detective hauled

the other to his feet. Crane looked round blinking.

"Someone gave me a crack on the head with something that felt like a sledge-hammer," he said. "But," thrusting out a foot and gingerly trying it, "I'll be all right. Look." Although he swayed unsteadily, Crane proved he could walk.

"Good! Now then, steady; it's a wonder to me those fellows in that room haven't heard anything already. Quietly, I tell you!"

By this time they were making their way through the undergrowth to the gates.

"Did you climb over?" whispered Crane.

"Not a chance," said the American; "I prepare for emergencies of this kind." Whilst he was talking he wondered if the rope ladder would still be where he had left it—hanging from two spikes of the gates. If not, their retreat would be cut off with a vengeance.

But Lady Luck, who had been his guiding star so far that night, still proved loyal to him. When they reached the gates, casting quick glances to right and left to see if the two men he had put out had been substituted by others, the rope ladder was visible.

"Up with you," he urged.

Crane merely waited to steady his aching head for a moment after the recent exertion. Then, without questioning the order, he started to climb.

He was only half-way up when an urgent whisper came from below.

"Hurry!" he heard Whittle say. For the American detective, on guard, had seen a number of figures rush from the house. Somehow or other, the alarm must have been given to the occupants of that lighted room.

Every second was valuable.

"Get a move on!" he called up again.

He was in a ticklish dilemma. The ladder would not carry the weight of both, and Crane had not yet reached the top. Moreover, if he started to climb, they would both present admirable targets.

He decided to send the opposition a warning. The bullet from his noiseless automatic sped into the night. . . .

But the aftermath was heard distinctly: a hideous scream shattered the silence. . . . Charles Whittle realised that if he had not actually killed a man, he must have gravely wounded one.

Glancing up, he saw that his companion had now reached the top.

" You'll have to jump," he said ; " I'm coming up myself."

" Righto ! "

A few seconds later came the sound of a heavy thud on the other side of the gates. Crane had obeyed this second order.

With astonishing agility, Whittle clambered up the fragile ladder, reached the top, and then, without hesitation, hurled himself into space. It meant the risk of a broken leg or, at the least, a sprained ankle, but he had to take that chance. In another minute or so, hell would be let loose.

By the time he had regained his feet, Crane was by his side.

" What was that scream ? " asked the younger man.

" Never mind—we must get away. They'll be searching for us." Without any further words, the detective plunged ahead.

Whittle raised his glass.

" Here's how," he said.

They were sitting in Mrs. Hamble's own private sitting-room at " The Jolly Sailor." Late as it was, a hot and beautifully-cooked meal was before them. A monstrous beef steak, fresh

from the frying-pan, flanked with a huge dish of boiled potatoes and another of brussels sprouts, stood on the white table-cloth. A quart jug of beer completed the repast.

"An' there's some apple tart to follow, gents," had been Mrs. Hamble's parting words.

"You're not saying anything," went on Whittle.

Crane smiled.

"I've got so much to say I don't know where to begin," he confessed ; "just give me a couple of minutes to think, will you ?"

He laid down his knife and fork and stared into space. Really, this business was more like a dream than actual life. The past hour—that was until he and his surprisingly-found companion had gained sanctuary in "The Jolly Sailor"—had been a nightmare. Four men had poured out of the mechanically-controlled gates, curses pouring from their lips. The fugitives had waited, crouched on all fours, in a belt of thick woodland until the search-party had turned off sharply to the right ; and then, at a nudge from Whittle, who had once again resumed the generalship, this recruit to adventure had risen and, with what remained of his strength, had started towards safety.

But the danger was not yet past. They had moved too soon. A shout—and a flurry of rushing footsteps behind them told of hot pursuit.

“You go on,” Whittle had said; “I’ve got five more shots in this gun.”

“Five?” Philip had repeated; “did you use one, then?”

“Yes; had to. Now, no more talking, boy; you get on.”

Crane had refused. He couldn’t leave the man there.

“No; I stay with you,” he had replied.

And then, what seemed like a miracle had happened. When the searchers were almost on them, something appeared to distract their attention and they turned off once more—this time to the left. Another five minutes, and all was still.

“I think we can go on now,” Whittle had said. And noiselessly, but speedily, they had departed.

Arrived at “The Jolly Sailor”—and the joy of seeing its glimmering lights showing so hospitably in the gloom!—he had to undertake the job of introduction.

“Mrs. Hamble, this is a friend of mine. I met

him unexpectedly whilst out for a walk to-night." How weak it had sounded! "Mr. Green wants to know if he can put up with me here for a few days?"

"If it's quite convenient to you, madam," put in the American detective, very much on his best behaviour, and speaking in what he imagined was rustic English. "I've heard a lot about Mandling."

If Mrs. Hamble had any suspicion, her broad, homely face showed no sign of it.

"I must say we're getting quite famous down here," she responded with a smile. "Mr. Padden," turning to Crane, "you seem to have a good many friends who're fond of Mandling—first of all there was your Mr. Smith, and now there's your Mr. Green. . . . As it 'appens," she went on, addressing her remarks to the American now, "I do 'ave one more room vacant. It's small, but perhaps you won't mind that?"

"I'd sleep in a barn if needs be, Mrs. Hamble," said the American, anxious to please. "It's a shame disturbing you at this time of night, though."

"Not at all. I've always found the best of gentlemen 'as somewhat peculiar ways. . . . Any luggage, sir?"

" My bag's at the station, Mrs. Hamble."

" I can send Joe down for that. Now, p'rhaps you'd like a bit of a wash? In the meantime I can prepare a bite o' food for you. Anything particular you'd like, gentlemen? "

" I don't mind what it is—that's how hungry I am," confessed the American.

" Yes, anything you like, Mrs. Hamble," supported Crane.

Altogether the interview had passed off very well. The landlady was evidently one of those broad-minded souls who, once she took a fancy to anyone—as she had apparently taken to both of them—didn't trouble her placid mind about too many side issues. She went on face values, more or less, and probably in the past this criterion had not let her down.

After taking a deep drink out of his glass, and replenishing it from the quart jug of home-brewed beer, Whittle applied himself to his portion of the steak.

" Thank Heaven for food," he said; " I don't wonder soldiers, after battle, stoke all they can. But you're not eating anything, young fellow."

Crane roused himself out of his lethargy.

" I'm going to," he said; and at once fell

upon his share of the viands. After all, he had come out of the escapade alive, and that was something to be grateful for. True, he had not exactly covered himself with glory. As a matter of fact, if this American joker had not dropped from the blue he might have been dead by this time. But the cosy fire, the warm food, the wholesome beer, the satisfying companionship of the American—whom he was getting to like more and more as time went on—restored something of his usual optimism.

There was silence after this for at least twenty minutes. The nervous tension through which they had passed had made both men hungry ; and it was not until the last of the steak had vanished that they sat back with satisfied sighs.

At that moment Mrs. Hamble, like the good housewife she was, entered with a laden tray.

" I thought you might like a cup of coffee, gents," she said ; " an' it's *real* coffee—that I can promise 'you."

One sniff at the steaming beverage and Whittle, who came from a country where appetising coffee could be obtained at any café, pronounced the words justified. A sip—and he sprang from his chair.

"Mrs. Hamble," he said, "I've paid as much as two shillings for a cup of coffee at a London hotel, but this beats it hollow."

A couple of minutes later they were alone once again. The landlady had told them that they need not hurry, but that she herself was going to bed.

"You know your rooms, gents, so I needn't bother you any more," she added.

After closing the door behind her Whittle resumed his seat.

"Now, young man," he said decisively, "I think you and I had better have a talk."

"I've been thinking that myself," was the reply; "who's to begin?"

"Suppose we start with you?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"Well," returned Philip, lighting a pipe and sitting well back in the old-fashioned wooden chair, whilst Whittle, man-like, flung another lump of coal on to the fire with his hand; "my story starts no further back than last night. My name, as I've said, is Philip Crane—although I told Mrs. Hamble it was Padden. That's not too big a lie, because Sir Timothy Padden, the well-known designer of aeroplane engines, for whom

I work, is my uncle. I've lived practically all my life in Truro, and the reason I came to London yesterday afternoon was because of a belated holiday." The speaker proceeded to narrate the events following on his arrival at the London terminus down to the moment of meeting Whittle in so unexpected a fashion outside "The White House."

The detective listened with absorbed interest.

"And the girl you say is at a convent?"

"I think it's a convent; at least, it's a sort of nuns' Home, for want of a better description. She's safe enough there, anyway. That is, if that Soho restaurant keeper can be relied upon. But I know she's all right—I only had to look at the face of that Sister to be absolutely sure of it."

Whittle asked quickly one more question.

"What's the girl's name?"

Crane laughed in rueful fashion.

"You'll think me an awful ass, but I don't know," he confessed; "you see, there was so much else to talk about that I didn't think to ask."

"So you haven't heard her father's name?"

"No. But after what happened at that house

to-night I feel pretty certain he's being kept a prisoner there."

For some moments Whittle did not reply. But when he did speak it was to bring into that cosy atmosphere a shiver of apprehension.

" THIS looks like a nasty business," the American detective said.

" I agree," replied Crane ; " and now, let's hear your end. Where exactly do you come in on this thing ? "

" I've already told you I'm an American detective. I've been sent over here to pursue a certain line of inquiry. By the way," breaking off quickly, " during the short time you've been associated with this gang have you heard anything about a woman called ' The Empress ' ? "

" Yes. The man Stevensson mentioned her to me last night."

" You didn't see her ? "

" No. Who is she ? "

" I don't know—but I'm going to find out. And when I do, I think we shall be a little nearer the solution of this mystery. And now, do you mind answering some other questions ? "

" Not at all. I'm in a complete maze myself, except for the one outstanding fact that I'm

uncannily like another fellow called Crane who's a member of the gang."

"His real name is 'Birchall.' 'Philip Crane' is merely the name he's working under at the moment."

"Funny he should have picked on my name, though."

"Not so very. If you'd been in the crime racket as long as I have you'd know that there're a damned sight funnier things than that happening every day of the week. Now, let's get back to this woman called 'The Empress.' You say Svensson mentioned her to you. In what connection?"

"He referred to her in a manner that led me to think she was the head of the whole business."

"Good enough."

It was now Crane's turn to ask questions.

"What do you think is at the back of this, Whittle?"

"At the moment I haven't the least idea. But it's something *big*. Of that you can be certain. Did the girl say what her father did? What his particular line was?"

"No. She told me nothing beyond the fact that he was not a crook, but that he was weak, and that he had extraordinary ability in his

work—then we reached the convent, and I hadn't a chance to ask her anything else."

"A pity. If she had said exactly what work her father did, the rest might have been easy. She didn't drop even the slightest hint, I suppose, that he was an engraver?"

"An engraver? No. Why an engraver?"

But Whittle turned the question aside.

"Oh, nothing," he said evasively; "and now, I think we'll go to bed. In the morning I shall take the first train to London and make one or two calls. In the meantime you'll stay here and see what happens."

They parted on those terms.

Outside, at the top of the stairs, before proceeding along the narrow corridor which led to his room on the other side of the inn, the American detective held out his hand.

"Don't you worry, boy," he said; "we're going to see this thing through—you and I. Good night."

"Good night," returned Crane, and went to his room feeling better for the hearty handgrip which he had just received.

How long he had been asleep Philip did not know, but he awoke, his nerves tensed,

and with a prickling sensation all down his spine.

That cry? Had it been a cry? And from whence had it come? Outside the inn?

He waited, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound. But the darkness held only a deep, settled silence.

Ass! His nerves must have gone back on him. He must pull himself together.

He endeavoured to get to sleep again, but it was impossible. Thoughts came thronging at such a rate that his brain became a seething battle-ground for them. What had happened a few hours before, now returned to his memory with such force that he sat up in bed once again.

One thought above all others now occupied his attention: that cry could not have been his imagination. It must have been real. Otherwise, why should he have awakened from what had been a deep sleep?

Whittle!

He must go to his room—to see if he was all right.

Slipping out of bed, he had barely put a foot to the floor when a noise from behind made him suddenly turn. Then he knew why he had awakened: his subconscious mind had sent him

a warning. Through the window at the other end of the room a dark form was silhouetted. And close behind was another. . . . Sinister shapes.

He had no time to wonder how they had made the entry, for a voice said with cutting sibilance :

“ Put your hands up ! ”

And whilst he hesitated :

“ You’ve got just one more second ! ”

That second was a tense affair. Behind the men Crane could see a pale, watery moon, shedding a little fugitive light.

He started to lift up his hands, and then, with a spring like that of a wild animal, he leapt at the man who had threatened him. His outflung hands caught the fellow’s knees and gripped them tightly. There was no thought now for his own safety : he was so possessed with a maddening hatred that, for the moment, every consideration of self was blotted out. These devils had killed Whittle. Of that he could be certain. They had gone to his room first, probably using the same ladder, and had slain the American detective whilst he slept. That strangled cry which had come to him could have no other interpretation. . . .

He was like a man possessed. The normal,

somewhat easy going Philip Crane that Truro knew had changed into a fight-inflamed individual turned berserker.

He brought the man he had tackled down with a thud that shook the room. He heard the revolver drop from the other's hand and, conscious now that they were on an equality, worked his fingers up to the fellow's throat, gripped, and held on.

But whilst he was squeezing the breath out of his antagonist, he forgot altogether the existence of the second man—forgot it until the fact was brought home to him in painful fashion. For the second time within a few hours a succession of numbing blows descended on the back of his head, and, with scarcely a sound, he drifted upon the broad bosom of that tide which is called unconsciousness.

CHAPTER
XIV

MRS. AUBYN ST. CLAIR
HAS A CALLER

THAT well-known Society celebrity, Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair, smiled as the girl with the Titian hair came into the room.

"Good morning, my dear," she said, in her best Mayfair accent.

Judith Felstead sank into a chair.

"How are things down at Mandling?" she asked.

"Proceeding with perfect regularity, I understand," was the reply. "I was there yesterday, and I told Ferguson to behave. And I think he will, now. You look as though you have something on your mind, darling."

"Don't play around," said the girl; but her curt retort could not cloak the fear lurking at the back of her eyes. "If you're going to get rid of me, Empress, come clean; don't beat about the bush like that!"

"You're being stupid, my dear," was the reply. "Have a cigarette, and I'll ring for a

drink." The speaker, after opening the jade box, went to the wall and pressed a bell.

"Because you made a mistake that anyone in the circumstances might have done," she went on in an easy, conversational tone, "is that any reason why I should dispense with the services of one of my most accomplished assistants? As for this second Crane—I suppose it is he to whom you are referring?—I don't think we need give the fellow a second thought."

Judith shook her head.

"That's what Stevensson said; but I'm afraid he is going to cause trouble."

"How?"

Before the Red-Haired Madonna—to use Philip Crane's phrase—could reply, the telephone on the occasional table shrilled.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair, with the polished grace that made her so great a favourite in Society circles.

Judith Felstead had often told herself that she was psychic. At this moment, she looked at the telephone and the woman holding the receiver with suspicion. Did that call come from Mandling?

Yes—she knew it. And something had gone wrong. The face of The Empress was distorted

—vanished now was the calm, serene, if proud beauty, to be replaced by an expression of devilish rage.

“What? Speak louder, you fool . . . !”

Another two minutes, during which the woman listening seemed on the verge of an outbreak. Then :

“Keep him there until I come down. My God . . . !”

But so great an actress was this female Jekyll and Hyde that, by the time she turned to her visitor, she was practically her normal self again.

“I must have a cigarette,” she said.

Judith rose, her limbs shaking. She struck a match to hold to the other’s cigarette, but her fingers wavered so that The Empress had to perform the office for herself.

The girl shrank back.

“What’s happened down there?” she asked.

“Down there?” repeated the woman. And her manner indicated that she was about to question the right of the other to voice such a query.

“Don’t fool with me, Empress,” pleaded Judith. “That telephone call came from Mandling. Don’t I know it! And something has gone wrong there . . . Tell me what it is . . . please.”

Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair took a walk up and down the room. With all her sophistication, she might have been a tigress in the jungle smelling out her prey.

"I hate to have to confess it, Judith, my dear," she said silkily at length, "but you were right, and I was wrong. The man Crane—the second one, I mean; the one who deceived you—is causing trouble. You would never guess what has happened."

"He has gone to Mandling?" asked Judith, in a low tone.

"He not only went to Mandling yesterday, but actually tried to get into 'The White House.' Of course, that was very foolish of him. Stevensson, as we know, can be depended upon to deal with almost any situation, no matter how awkward. He traced this Crane to the village inn. . . . Well, that intrepid young man, so stupidly quixotic, is now safely back at 'The White House.' I don't think he will give any more trouble."

The red-headed girl heaved a sigh of relief.

"So not much damage has been done?"

The Empress pulled at her cigarette, inhaled, and then blew out the smoke through her finely-chiselled nostrils.

"On the contrary," she replied crisply, "a

great deal of damage has been done, I'm afraid. This man Crane—by the way, you haven't asked me yet how I got to know about him ? ”

The girl pulled herself up with a start. What cunning this woman used ! She remembered everything. In the excitement of the moment, she herself had forgotten that Stevansson had promised not to say anything about her mistake ; it was her own fear that had impelled her to speak.

“ Did Stevansson tell you ? ” she asked.

“ No—that's a little matter I shall have to settle with him when I see him again. It was the American who told me the story ; said he thought it best that I should know. But never mind that now : I was going to say that Crane had a companion down at Mandling.”

“ A companion ? ”

“ Yes. And it's this fellow—who was also at the inn last night, but he got away somehow—who may cause us no end of trouble. And if he does . . .” She did not add any further words, but the red-headed girl knew that the unspoken threat was directed against her.

A maid, after tapping on the door, entered.

“ Yes, Stanton ? ”

The maid advanced and held out a card.

"The gentleman says he wishes to see you immediately, madam."

"Bartholomew . . ." mused Mrs. St. Clair, reading from the card; "I don't know any Bartholomew."

"He says he's from Jardine's, madam."

"Well, I'd better see him, I suppose."

"I will leave you," said Judith.

"All right, dear. Now, don't distress yourself too much. I shall be seeing you to-night at 'The Purple Dove.' "

She bestowed a perfunctory kiss on the cheek of the girl, who shrank from the embrace, and hurriedly left the room.

"I'm afraid," Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair told herself, "that poor Judith is losing her grip. I can't keep people who make mistakes . . ."

After throwing away her cigarette, she prepared herself for the visitor.

His name had conveyed nothing to her, but, from the moment of his entry, she had a vague, uncomfortable suspicion that, somewhere or other, she had met him before.

"Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair ? "

"That is my name."

The visitor half turned towards the door as

though to make sure that what he was about to say could not be overheard.

"I have just five minutes, madam, in which to make a certain statement to you," he said.

"What is this? I understood you were from Jardine's?"

"One has to use a little finesse sometimes," was the reply; "I got to hear that Jardine's, the well-known caterers, were superintending the dinner party you are giving here to-night; and, naturally enough, in order to see you, I made use of that name."

This woman had not risen to her pre-eminence in the world of crime without possessing a wonderful sangfroid.

"You can leave out the preliminaries," she remarked.

"Very well, then," came the retort; "you have in your possession—that is, in the possession of certain associates of yours—a young friend of mine whose name is Crane—Philip Crane. He is an Englishman, who comes from Truro, and by nature is very inoffensive. It has happened that, through a peculiar set of circumstances, he has somewhat unconventionally made your acquaintance. Last night he was forcibly abducted from an inn at Mandling called 'The Jolly Sailor' and

taken—now, this is where you may be useful, Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair. I very much wish to know where Crane *was* taken.”

“ You are, of course, mad ! ”

The visitor made a short, but not ungracious inclination of his head.

“ I expected something not quite so obvious,” he commented. “ Now,” looking at his watch, “ I find that three minutes of my five have already gone. That leaves us very little time in which to come to the understanding which, I can assure you, is—from your point of view, at least—very essential.”

“ Unless I am mistaken, Mr. Bartholomew—that, of course, is not your name—you come from America. We happen to be somewhat more civilised here than in the United States, in some respects. For instance, within one minute of my making a call through the telephone, I can be ordering your arrest.”

The caller smiled.

“ You would not be so foolish as that.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because if the police should come here, I could pass on to them some very interesting information about yourself. Now, just this final word ; Either you ring up your country

head-quarters, 'The White House,' near Mandling, and, in my presence, give the most definite instructions for Philip Crane to be released, or——"

"Yes?"

"I shall take what steps I think necessary."

The Empress did some quick thinking. She had not betrayed her emotions, she knew—she was far too much mistress of herself for that—but she realised who this man was: he was the companion of Crane in the affair of the previous night.

What was he—a detective? Could that mean that the American police were also on the trail of Crane—or rather Birchall? She had to bluff.

"I'll give you just thirty seconds to leave **this** house," she said; and pressed the bell.

"It has been a real pleasure to meet you—*Empress*," said the visitor, and, as though leaving royalty, walked backwards to the door.

A few miles away, a girl was sitting in a small, barely furnished room, busily occupied with her thoughts. They were not pleasant reflections.

Margery Ferguson kept on telling herself that she should have been happy—as happy, that was, of course, as any girl in her circumstances could expect to be. For here she was shielded from

the world, kept out of danger, and surrounded by friends who lavished every care and attention upon her. Yet . . .

It was the thought of her father that brought such distress. How wretched he had made her life ! What strange illogicality was it that cursed a man so clever as George Ferguson to be such a weakling in his moral character ? Ever since she could remember, he had been an irresponsible gambler. Even back in her early childhood—that was after her mother had died—she had come to the conclusion that her father was a man destined for disaster. For what other end was possible for him with his instability ?

The door opened to interrupt this gloomy train of reflection. A sweet-expressed nun, whose skin was like a schoolgirl's in its freshness, smiled at her as she placed a tray down on the small table.

“ Ready for your milk, dear ? ” she asked.

Margery smiled back at her. What an angel this woman was ! Coming straight from the turbulent, sin-soaked world that she knew, Margery had found it difficult at first to believe that Sister Faith was really human. How this Swiss girl must have schooled and disciplined herself before reaching such a state of splendid selflessness.

"I don't like giving you all this trouble, Sister."

"Trouble! My dear, how many more times do I have to tell you it's a pleasure? Why, I don't know what my uncle would say if he heard you talking like this!" She held up a work-roughened finger in playful reproach.

Margery had to smile. The contrast between the corpulent Soho restaurant proprietor and this human lily was so striking.

She got up and gently pressed the Sister down into her chair.

"I'm going to wait on you to-day," she said. It was the least she could do; she had protested many times during her short stay against being allowed the luxury of a private room, but the nuns had argued in turn that she wanted quiet and rest. So this delicious solitude was afforded her—and how Heaven-sent she found it. Agitated as she had been, storm-tossed and almost distraught, she had not felt she could have faced even the gentle stares of the nuns. These women might be out of the world, but a good many of them, she fancied, still maintained an acute interest in what was going on beyond the four walls of the Convent of the Sacred Heart. They were not all like Sister Faith.

As she sipped her milk, the latter asked a question.

" I expect you're finding it very dull here, my dear ? " she said.

" No." Margery shook her head. " It's heaven—perfect. I don't think I have ever known what real happiness meant before."

" That's a very sad thing to hear a girl of your age say, Margery."

" I know ; but it's true, all the same." An overwhelming desire to confide in her companion came and, before she could put up any fight, it had conquered. She found herself telling the story of her life, right back from the day her mother had died, leaving her to face existence with a father who, although occasionally kind, was thoroughly unsatisfactory in almost every other way.

Continuing, she brought her narrative up to the point where George Ferguson one day had mysteriously disappeared.

Sister Faith opened her blue eyes wider.

" Disappeared ? " she repeated.

" Yes. We were living in a dreadful street at Harlesden then—oh," covering her eyes with her hands, " I can see that awful house now. It was just a slum—but, as father said he couldn't

afford anything better, I had to put up with it. I should have gone to work myself if he had not been so angry every time I brought the subject up. Of course," with a pitiable little smile, "I don't quite know what I could have done. You see, Sister, I was never trained to do anything—except look after the house."

"That's the best work a woman can do, my dear."

"I don't think so," tossing her hair back from her forehead; "I hated it. We were so poor—so frightfully poor."

"What did your father do?"

"I never knew. He was always so secretive about his work—always hinting that he was going to make a fortune. On those days, he would be ridiculously excited; but that mood soon passed, because, in the ordinary way, he was terribly depressed. In both cases, he was very difficult to live with."

"I can quite believe it. But you were telling me that he 'disappeared.'"

"Yes—there's no other word for it. One day a car drew up outside the house. A man who looked like a clergyman in mufti—I mean, he had a clergyman's type of face: thin, refined. And yet—," she shuddered, "there was something

awful about him, something sinister that made me feel afraid. His eyes were icy ; they seemed absolutely cold, no warmth in them . . .”

“ If this distresses you, Margery, don’t tell me any more.”

“ Oh, I feel I want to. I *must*. I haven’t had a chance to talk to anyone since—only—and I couldn’t tell him all.” She struggled with herself for a few moments, and then, choking back a sob, resumed. “ That man who called—Stevensson he said his name was—wanted to know if father was at home. He was—drunk.”

“ Oh ! ”

“ Yes, he was lying on the sofa in the little sitting-room, completely drunk. The man with the cold eyes came in after me with his companion, and told me to leave the room. At first, I didn’t want to, because I didn’t know who these two strangers were, but then I thought I’d better obey, or father would be angry when he became sober. I was only away ten minutes, but when I got back—father was gone.”

“ What had happened ? ”

“ I don’t know—and I’ve never heard. But that’s only part of the mystery. I’m sure that father is in the hands of criminals—I suspected

the man Stevansson . . . his dreadful eyes . . . from the beginning."

" Haven't you heard anything ? "

" Only a few words on a scrap of paper. It was headed ' Mandling,' which I looked up and found to be a village in Kent. The handwriting was my father's—there was no doubt about that—but there were only four other words."

" What were they ? "

" ' Come and help me,' " was the reply. " I dare say it seems silly to you, Sister, for a grown man to send an appeal like that to his daughter, but my father was never quite like a normal person."

" Have you done nothing ? I mean, haven't you been to the police ? "

" No ; I was afraid to do that."

" But it was your duty."

" I know, Sister ; but I was frightened that my father might be implicated in something criminal. He is so weak. . . ."

" But, all the same, if you think he's in danger—and you evidently do—you should go to the police."

" But I've told you why I didn't. And now, perhaps, it's too late." A violent fit of sobbing shook the girl so that she could not say any

more. The nun, taking up the tea-tray, looked down at her with infinite compassion. Then, feeling that this was a situation with which she could not hope to deal, she quietly left the room.

Margery's distress did not last very long. The sight of the empty chair opposite her made her feel wretched. To cause sadness to that sweet Sister Faith—how ungrateful!

Now that she was calmer, her mind became concentrated in a different direction. But it was not of the nun, who had been such a friend to her, she was thinking. No, it was a man who occupied her thoughts now—and, even more strange, that man was not her father.

This other was young—not many years older than herself—and, for a few moments on a never-to-be-forgotten day, she had rested in his arms. And she had unthinkingly sent him into danger. For that was what had happened, without a doubt: an appeal had been wrung from her, and this Sir Galahad had answered it. He had pledged her his help, and he must have gone straight to Mandling after leaving her at this harbourage.

What had become of him there? She scarcely dared to think.

At this moment, in an upstairs room, the

Mother Superior of the Convent of the Sacred Heart gave her decision.

“ We must help the poor child, Sister,” she said ; “ if you will inquire the number, I will ring up Scotland Yard.”

PHILIP opened his eyes slowly. This was not the inn. For where was his bed? . . . the wardrobe? . . . the washstand? . . . Then, with a groan, he remembered: he had been attacked that night—was it still night?—had put up a fight, but had been knocked out. After that, there was a blank.

Although he understood he was now conscious, he remained still for a few more minutes. He wanted to get his strength back. And moving, as he had already found, was an infinitely painful process. His body was racked with pain; it was as though he had been bruised from head to foot.

A particularly violent throb in his right temple made him attempt to raise a hand. Confusion became further confounded with that: there was a jingling of metal, and, to his amazement, he found that one hand could not be lifted without the other. He stared stupidly before realising that both his wrists were encircled by a pair of handcuffs. He was a prisoner.

As the truth flooded through him, he heard a laugh.

" Pretty, aren't they ? " inquired a voice.

He half turned, and into his orbit of gaze came a man : a man who, although probably ten years older, might quite easily have been mistaken for himself. The man who had arrived so unexpectedly at Stevensson's house—the fellow Whittle had mentioned : Birchall, the crook for whom he had been mistaken at the Mid-Western Hotel. The sight gave him a certain stimulus ; at least, he was getting nearer the heart of the mystery.

Birchall, negligently balancing a revolver on the palm of his right hand, came closer, standing over him.

" You ought to have kept out of this, young fella," he said ; " but, gee, I don't wonder Judith made the mistake : you're the dead ringer of me—at least, you would be if you were ten years older. But, as I say, you were a poor sap to get into this mess. What made you, anyway ? "

The strange thing was that Crane felt himself almost liking the man. The other's insouciant manner, darkened though it was by a leer, was appealing in a bizarre sort of way.

It occurred to him quickly that the best policy for him to adopt would be to affect simplicity.

"It wasn't my fault that I got into it," he said; "I was mistaken for someone else"—he paused—"and, by Jingo, I understand now—that someone else must have been you!"

"Without a doubt, kid," drawled the other; "but you're in the soup all right; and there'll be no getting out."

"I don't know what you mean. You can't do this sort of thing in England." He held up his handcuffed wrists in illustration.

"Oh-h?" softly commented the other; "is that so? Well, it seems to have happened all the same. And what are you going to do about it, eh?"

"What can I do? Two men broke into my bedroom at the local inn last night, and though I put one of them out, the other got behind me . . . Look here, you seem a decent sort; what does all this mean?"

The only reply he got was a further chuckle.

"Trying to do the soft stuff, eh? Well, kid, that won't work with me. You ought to have thought of what would follow before you stuck your nose in." He bent a little lower. "Do you really want to know what is going to happen?"

he went on, with sadistic maliciousness ; “ well, I’ll tell you : they keep a pet torturer down at this joint for guys like you. Badoglio his name is. He’s an Italian, and about three times as big as they make ’em nowadays. He’s got a few special ideas of his own . . .” The speaker broke off with a grin in a manner that made Crane afraid he would be sick.

“ Still, that can wait—the later you see friend Badoglio, the better ; take that from me. In the meantime, you’d better come clean with an explanation of how you got mixed up with our business.”

“ I’ve already told you. I was mistaken for you by a red-headed woman.”

“ Yes. But you knew damned well she was making a mistake.” The speaker, after shifting his revolver into the other hand, pulled out a pocket-flask and unscrewed the top. “ No funny tricks, now,” he warned ; “ I can shoot just as well with my left hand as with my right.” He lifted the flask to his lips and took a deep drink.

“ That’s better,” he gloated, smacking his lips. “ A drop of that would do you good,” he went on ; but replaced the flask in his pocket.

Philip felt a faint resurgence of hope. The

man had evidently been drinking before, and if he kept on, he would possibly become senseless. That circumstance might not improve, by the slightest degree, the helplessness of his own position, but he was in the mood to snatch at any straw.

Birchall's last potation made him sway unsteadily. He became surprisingly loquacious.

"It's all a mystery, you say?" he went on, his speech now somewhat slurred; "well, I don't mind puttin' you wise. There's somethin' big goin' on here. That's why"—with a drunken hiccough—"there won't be any chance of you gettin' out with your life, young fella! Somethin' big. . . . Here," he continued, lurching forward, bending down, and catching hold of the prisoner's right arm; "up you get; I'll show you . . ."

For one breathless moment, Philip considered bringing his handcuffed wrists down upon the other's head. But, sodden though he might be, Birchall proved quick enough to read his thoughts.

"I'll plug you, mind; don't think you've got the slightest chance, kid. Another look like that, and——" He patted the handle of his revolver significantly.

Because any reply in the circumstances would have sounded suspicious, Crane kept silent.

The crook repeated his former words.

" Yes, I'll show you something . . . "

His hand still on the prisoner's arm, he guided Crane across the bare floor. Then he placed a finger on the wall, part of which opened.

" In there," he said.

Prompted by an irresistible curiosity, Philip looked through the hidden panel. This aperture was only about six inches square, but he was able to get a clear view of the room on the other side.

Staring fascinatedly, he saw an elderly man bending over a desk. He was unshaven, and looked generally unkempt. •

The next thing Philip noticed was the sagging of his chin, and, instantly, the words of the girl returned to him.

" He is not a criminal, but weak—weak—— ! "

Crane's heart gave a bound. Helpless as he was, he had solved the mystery. For this man, working so industriously, could be none other than the girl's father—the very person he had promised to save !

A stealthy whisper sounded in his ear.

" You see what he's doing ? "

Crane made no reply. His intuition told him the answer. This man, wearing a green shade

to protect his eyes from the glare of the brilliant electric desk-lamp, was toiling at something illicit.

“ He is the cleverest engraver in the world,” he heard Birchall say.

With the words, came the whole of the secret. Full knowledge was given to him : this man was a forger.

CHAPTER INSPECTOR BODKIN DOES
XVI A LITTLE LIP-PLUCKING

CHARLES WHITTLE had had a half-smile on his face when he left that room in the Curzon Street house, but once on the pavement, he became very serious indeed.

That chance discovery at the inn had guided him right. It had been an amazing piece of luck ; he had been able to recognise Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair immediately : this leader of London Society was the same woman who had been mixed up in that notorious murder case on the White Star liner, *Carapanthia*, when he had been returning to New York three years before. She had been travelling under a very different name then, and no one appeared to be aware that she was a well-known personage in London's Mayfair, but his job had given him a remarkable memory for faces, and he had no possible doubt it was the same person.

A curious affair, in many ways. Officially, the man had been supposed to have committed

suicide by falling through his porthole two nights out from New York. There had been reasons why the New York police had not made too many close inquiries after the liner had berthed at the 14th Street dock. Lowenstein had been a close friend of the notorious gentleman gangster, Crowle. A very close friend. And he had been many other things as well. Lowenstein, without any reasonable doubt, was connected with the Guinin outfit who had flooded South America with bad paper. His ways at that time had approached very closely those of Birchall, alias Philip Crane, who was now in England.

The puzzle was beginning to fit ; he could now see the pieces falling into place : this woman, who called herself Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair, but who to the underworld was known as The Empress—he had Melton's word for that—had been seen talking to Lowenstein an hour before the man's loss was reported. Indeed, one witness had been ready to swear that she was actually in his cabin.

She had got away with that, but apparently had not learned wisdom ; for here she was, intimately allied with another forging outfit. For that was the correct designation of the crowd down at " The White House."

And that other woman? The one with the striking red hair. Somewhere at the back of his mind he had a vague feeling that he had also seen her before. True, it had been just a fleeting vision he had had as she left the room immediately upon his entry.

While he had been thus cogitating he had remained practically stationary a few yards away from the house. But now, having made up his mind what action to take, he lit a cigarette and began to walk quickly away.

He had scarcely taken a few steps, however, before a woman passed him. Instantly he recognised her as the recent companion of The Empress.

He was wondering whether he should accost her when she half turned, stopped, and then actually spoke to him herself.

"Got what you wanted, Mr. Dick?" she asked.

He smiled at her.

"My name's Bartholomew," he said.

"Come off it. You're an American 'dick,' and I want to know what you were doing in that house just now." He noticed that her face was flushed and that her eyes were brighter than a normal woman's should have been.

Charles Whittle had had considerable experience of criminals and he realised that this woman was either under the influence of dope or that she had recently been put to a considerable mental strain. A thought came: perhaps she had quarrelled with The Empress.

"Are you a friend of Mrs. St. Clair?" he asked.

"What's that to do with you?"

"It may be a lot to do with *you*, young lady," he said sternly; "you can take that from me."

"Ses you!" she scoffed.

"Anyway, if you'd like to see me some time to-morrow, ring up Metropolitan 0177 and ask for Mr. Bartholomew. Don't forget—Mr. Bartholomew." With that he raised his hat, signalled a passing taxicab which had just come from the direction of Piccadilly, spoke an address, and got into the vehicle. He gave no backward glance as the cab sped away.

Within twenty minutes he was sitting in a room on the third floor of London's police headquarters. The official facing him was a grey-haired, grim-faced man of late middle age, whose downward droop of the upper lip gave his mouth a curious sardonic expression.

" Well, Whittle ? And how's the Land of the Free—free for murders, I mean ; with no questions asked, and no licence required ? " Detective-Inspector Bodkin's speech was in keeping with his sneering mouth.

Whittle, who had never liked the man during a casual acquaintanceship which extended over ten years, kept his temper. He had asked to see Bodkin's superior, but Superintendent Watson was away.

" America's all right," he replied. " It's this side that wants looking after. What would you say if I could put you on to a really first-class case, Bodkin ? "

" I should laugh ! " was the answer.

" Laugh, eh ? Well, if the Press boys get hold of a big head-line sensation within the next few days, and readers write in wanting to know what Scotland Yard's been thinking about, don't blame me, for I've given you your chance."

" What's all this rot you're talking, Whittle ? "

" It isn't rot—it's the truth. I'm over here on a sort of holiday—well, I call it a holiday—but I've happened to run up against something big outside my usual line." He had not intended to take this action, but his hand had been forced. After the previous night's events at the Jolly

Sailor Inn he realised very vividly that it was impossible for him to carry on with this thing alone. They had got hold of Crane, and he was playing a lone hand. Although his employers in New York had intimated that they would prefer for the police to be kept out of it, yet, on the other hand, they had given him full permission, if circumstances necessitated him doing so, to go to Scotland Yard—or, indeed, to the police chiefs of any other country into which his investigations led him.

It was bad luck having to interview this man, but nevertheless, as a matter of plain duty, he felt he had to state his case.

“ Well, what’s it all about ? ” inquired Bodkin, the sneer very palpable now.

“ There’s a village in Kent called Mandling,” started the American briskly ; “ it’s only a few miles from Hythe. Just outside this village there’s a largish place named ‘ The White House.’ Two men are being kept prisoners there.”

“ Go on ; this sounds funny.”

“ Funny or not, it’s the truth.”

“ Who are the men ? ”

“ One of them is a friend of mine, a young aeroplane designer. He works for his uncle, Sir Timothy Padden, in Cornwall.”

The eyes of the detective-inspector opened wider.

“What’s he doing at Mandling?”

“That’s a long story. But he’s in that house, kept there against his will. It’s a clear case of abduction. He and I were staying last night at Mandling at an inn called ‘The Jolly Sailor.’ About three o’clock the place was attacked, and he was taken away. I came to London as soon as possible to get help—there is a strong guard, and I had little chance of doing much on my own.”

Bodkin smiled.

“You seem to be busy,” he remarked; “weren’t you ringing us up the other night about someone? A fellow called Crane?”

“His real name is Birchall,” supplied the other.

“Well, Crane or Birchall, what’s he got to do with you? Aren’t you over here on a holiday?”

“I am—and I’m not. I rang up the other night to know if this crook Birchall had been traced to London. He was clever enough, let me remind you, to give you the slip at Southampton. Watson said he would let me know.” The speaker leaned forward. “You

don't want me to tell Watson that you've given me the Merry Ha ! Ha ! do you ? Because I'll tell you this, Bodkin : in the hope of making me look a fool, you're running a pretty grave risk of neglecting your duty."

" I am, am I ? "

Whittle nodded.

" You are—and you can take that as the straight goods. Before we go any further, perhaps you'd like to look at this." He pulled out a pocket-book and from it took a paper. Smoothing this out, he laid it before the Scotland Yard official.

Bodkin's manner underwent a change as he read the few lines of typewritten matter.

" Why didn't you show me this at the beginning ? " he demanded.

" Because I gave you credit for a little intelligence," was the shattering reply ; " you've known me now for over ten years, and yet you have the damned gall to think that I'd come here on a cock-and-bull errand. Now then, are you going to see to this Mandling affair, or not ? "

Before Bodkin could reply the telephone on his desk rang.

" Excuse me," he said, with a belated attempt at courtesy.

"Carry on being a copper," was the smooth reply.

Bodkin scowled, but the next moment his attention was occupied with the words that came over the wire.

"Who do you say you are?" he asked. And when the reply came: "Do you mind repeating that?"

He listened for a few more moments and then, drawing a pad towards him, scribbled a few notes.

Then, with a final: "I'll certainly be along, madam," he replaced the receiver.

"This a love affair of yours?" asked Whittle, who thought it was his turn to jibe.

"I was speaking to a nun," was the answer

"Naughty! I thought nuns lived within four walls, and never had any talk with anyone—let alone a coarse-minded policeman like you!"

"Don't try to be funny; that message was serious. I couldn't quite get the full hang of it, but it's something about a girl who's supposed to be threatened by a gang of crooks, and whose father is in a house at Mandling."

The amusement left the American's face. Whittle was now keen and intent.

"Which proves that what I've just been telling you is something more than hot air," he said.

Bodkin leaned back in his swivel-chair.

"We get some funny people telephoning us here; but the Mother Superior of a convent. . . !" He rose and took from a hook behind the door a bowler hat that badly wanted brushing. "I'm going along to this place now," he went on; "if you like, you can come too."

"I do like," replied Whittle. He knew the other did not want his company, but this fact merely increased his desire to see for himself the girl who was to supply another missing link in the mystery.

But disappointment met them at the Convent of the Sacred Heart. They found the Mother Superior in a state of great agitation.

"I don't quite know what has happened," she told the scowling detective-inspector; "but Miss Ferguson, the girl I was speaking about on the telephone, has disappeared."

"Gone?"

"Yes; and in the most unaccountable manner. Although no one saw her leave, the inference is

that she must have acted on a sudden and ungovernable impulse."

At this point Whittle insinuated himself into the conversation.

" May I inquire if she knew you intended to telephone to Scotland Yard ? " he asked.

" No, I don't think so. She confided her trouble to one of our Sisters this morning, and the latter certainly did mention the police, but she gave no indication that a communication would be made to the authorities. When Sister Faith told me about it, I made the decision myself."

" It's easy to see what's happened," said Whittle to Bodkin ; " the girl got frightened. Her father is in the hands of this gang and she thought, no doubt, that he would be arrested with the rest."

Bodkin nodded.

" I feel so anxious about the poor child," went on the Mother Superior ; " may I ask what you intend to do ? "

" We shall make a search for her," was the guarded reply.

" Will you let me have any news ? "

" Certainly, madam."

Still frowning, for he felt that Fate had made

a fool of him, the inspector turned to the door. Outside the convent, he turned to Whittle.

“ I’ll pass this on to Watson,” he said ; “ he’ll be returning to duty this afternoon. I’m only deputising. You’d better come along to the Yard at four o’clock. I’ll tell him you’ll be there, eh ? ”

“ All right.”

Four o’clock. That meant the loss of some valuable hours, but he did not see how it could be averted. In the meantime Whittle decided to pay a visit to a man who lived in the neighbourhood of Baker Street. Abe Goldschmidt, that once famous criminal lawyer, who on his retirement left New York to settle in London, might be able to tell him something further about The Empress. Although he was out of business, Goldschmidt, through his former connections with the criminal underworld, knew a great deal that was going on behind the scenes in London. And, in any case, he would be sure of a very entertaining conversation. Although official enemies in the past, through being arrayed on different sides of the law, Goldschmidt and he privately had always been very good friends. And this friendship had increased since the

lawyer had retired from his extensive practice amongst the crooks of New York.

Whittle was still pondering over the different links in the chain when he stepped absent-mindedly off the pavement.

He heard a shrill cry of warning, caught sight out of the corner of his eye of a huge green car bearing down upon him, and then everything went black.

* * * *

A crowd soon collected, and a policeman bent over the form of the unconscious man lying in the roadway.

"It's all right, officer; don't you worry. This gentleman's a friend of mine. I was so excited at seeing him that I couldn't pull up in time. But I'm sure he's not badly hurt."

The constable stared at the speaker.

"It seems to me," he said severely, "that you were driving far too fast. You might have killed him."

"Oh, rubbish, officer," was the smiling response; "he's merely stunned. Where's the nearest hospital?"

"No need to take him to a hospital; I'm a doctor," said another voice. "Just let me have a look at him." A brisk-mannered, middle-aged

man, dressed in a tight-fitting dark grey overcoat, without waiting for any further permission, knelt by the side of the unconscious man and made a rapid examination.

" Nothing serious, officer," he said, looking up at the constable ; " no bones broken ; he's just stunned. Be as right as rain in half an hour."

At the words, the manner of the police constable softened.

" Let this be a lesson to you," he told the motorist ; " there's too much of this careless driving nowadays. What about 'im ? " He pointed to the man still lying in the roadway.

The driver of the car remained unruffled.

" I'll take him along to my place in Montagu Street. Can you spare the time, doctor ? "

" I've got twenty minutes," replied the medical man ; " not that he'll need much attention."

" Come along, then—and thanks very much. That all right, officer ? "

The police constable nodded, and then resumed his professional duties, waving dispersal to the crowd with a movement of his gloved hand.

Within ten minutes the big car pulled up at what looked like a mews. The driver got down from his seat, opened the door, and winked at the doctor.

“ Easy enough, wasn’t it ? ” he remarked ;
“ and now let’s get the swine inside.”

Charles Whittle had experienced many unpleasant moments during the course of his professional life, but never one so nauseating as when, returning to consciousness, he stared upwards into the face of the man leaning over him.

Grosner ! An enemy of many years !

“ Doing the busy-body here as well as in the States, eh ? ” sneered a voice ; “ why don’t you damned dicks know when you’re well off ? Can’t walk about like an ordinary guy ; must go pushing your noses into every corner. Well, get this—and get it straight : you won’t be able to do much harm in the future. I can promise you that, Whittle.”

One of the most valuable axioms that the detective had learned through life was to keep his mouth shut when the occasion demanded it.

He did so now. It was easy to see what had happened. He must have been shadowed from the moment he had left the house of The Empress in Curzon Street. Abstracted as he had been, it had been easy for Grosner to run him down—the wonder was he had not been killed.

And now ?

He was a prisoner. He would be kept there until the gang, of which Grosner must be a member, had completed their work—or, perhaps, it was intended that he should be got rid of. In any case, he would be powerless to help young Crane. At the thought, he involuntarily groaned.

The next moment a door slammed heavily. He was alone.

CHAPTER
XVII

MRS. HAMBLE
FINDS MYSTERY

SUPERINTENDENT WATSON turned irritably to his companion.

"It was quite understood that he should come here this afternoon?" he asked.

"Yes. I said you'd be back at four o'clock, and would be pleased to see him. He knew that this information would be passed on to you. That's not the explanation."

"Then what is?"

Bodkin pulled at his lower lip.

"Well," he replied, "if that telephone call from the Convent of the Sacred Heart hadn't said something about a house at Mandling, I'd have thought that Whittle was trying to pull my leg. He's got something of a reputation for that, you know."

Watson shook his head.

"Whittle is one of the soundest men I've met," he said; "and you can wipe it out of your mind that he was not in dead earnest. I must say,

Bodkin," he went on more severely, " I'm rather surprised at the attitude you took up. Why didn't you get into touch with the Folkestone police straight away and tell them to go along to this ' White House ' ? "

The answer was sullen.

" I wasn't going to take any chances. A nice thing if it had been just a hoax. The Yard has too many critics now, what with these damned ' special crime reporters ' and people writing in to the newspapers."

" That's all very well—but you ought to have rung up Folkestone. Get me through now."

When the connection was made, Superintendent Watson spoke slowly and distinctly for some three minutes. At the end, he wore a more satisfied expression.

" That was Laidley," he vouchsafed ; " good chap. He's going to look into it himself. And now, why the devil isn't Whittle here ?—that's what I want to know."

Bodkin did some more lip-plucking. He had taken his rebuke in a bad spirit, and it was a matter of some personal satisfaction that Whittle had not kept the appointment.

" Perhaps something he considered more important turned up," he suggested with a sneer.

Watson scowled at the speaker.

"You seem to have a prejudice against my friend," he remarked.

Bodkin found no answer to this snub, and, obeying the hint, left the room.

The pawnbroker, who was so repulsively Jewish, humped his shoulders in an expressive gesture.

"I'm robbing myself if I give you a pound," he said ; "but, still, you're a nice girl . . ."

Margery choked back her anger. She knew the brooch was valuable—her father had once told her it was worth at least ten pounds.

"I couldn't take a pound for it."

"Very well." The pawnbroker's manner changed. "I am here to do bizness, not to run a charity home. Good morning." He turned away.

Fear clutched at her heart. She had to have money, and get it quickly.

"I'll take a pound," she said ; "but I'm not selling it, please remember. I'm simply putting it in pledge."

"Of course !" The ingratiating smile had returned to the greasy face. "Here you are, my dear."

A grimy pound note was passed over the counter, a ticket was given her, and then she found herself fumbling through the semi-darkness of the shop towards the side-door by which she had entered five minutes before.

She would have liked to have taken a taxi, but every shilling was precious, and so, after waiting at the end of the street for several minutes, she got on to a Strand-bound bus.

At Charing Cross there was an item of good news. A train was due to leave for Hythe in ten minutes. Mandling, she had already ascertained, was a small station inland from the coast resort which the Southern Railway advertise as "The Jewel of Kent."

It was not until the train had started, and she was leaving London behind, that a full realisation of what she had done came to her. She had acted on a sudden and overpowering impulse. In that brooding mood which had followed Sister Faith leaving the room, her mind had been filled with but one thought: what was happening to Philip Crane?

She had to know—nothing else seemed to matter. He would be at Mandling, of course—hadn't he promised to go there?

She had closed her eyes in the attempt to shut

out the scene of terror which had formed in her brain. But, in the darkness, the vividness of the waking nightmare—for that was what it was—had increased. She saw a small, bare room, with a man lying bound upon the floor ; over him bent a gigantic figure in whose hand was a long-bladed dagger. Every now and then, the steel would bite into the prisoner's flesh . . .

What power was it that had brought this vision ? Good or evil ? She had wondered at first if she could be ill—whether some stealthy but dread disease was overtaking her. But, no—when she opened her eyes again everything was normal. And yet that vision which had now vanished had made her shake in actual terror.

There could be no waiting after this. On the mantelpiece was a small pad and a pencil. But so urgent had seemed the need that she had not even waited to scribble a line of farewell and regret. Time enough for that when she got away. She would write from Mandling.

And she must be quick. Any moment Sister Faith might return, and there would be a scene. She had known what the nun would say : that it was her personal duty to remain in the security of the convent. Let the police—for wasn't that

their job?—undertake the task of rescuing her father and bringing this gang of crooks to justice.

But it was not of her father she had thought. He had receded so far into the distance that now he was merely a misty memory. Yet, how could she have explained this to a woman divorced from the world?

“ Can’t you say anything, George Johnson, except standing there, starin’ ? ” Mrs. Hamble, a little confused in her phraseology because of the stressful time through which she had recently passed, rapped on the table with her clenched hand.

The local police constable fiddled with his belt.

“ Well, w’ot am I to do, Mrs. ’Amble ? You’ve got no definite clue as to who these fellers were.”

“ Go an’ report it to someone with more brains than yourself—that’s what you’ve got to do. D’ye think I’m goin’ to allow a respectable public-house like mine to be broken into by burglars and worse ? ’Ow many more times do you want me to tell you that that young gen’leman’s disappeared ?—and where ’e’s gone, I

don't know. But that 'e put up a good fight, I could tell by the state of 'is room."

The Mandling custodian of the law pulled out a notebook.

" This 'ere affair is very peculiar, Mrs. 'Amble ; an' although you've given me a good many partic'lars, I must ask you some more questions. First of all : where's the second lodger gone ? That's the point."

" Disappeared—with never so much as a ' thank you ' for puttin' meself to all the trouble last night ! "

" 'E'll 'ave to be found," declared P.C. Johnson ; " don't you see, Mrs. 'Amble, 'e'll be a very valuable witness ? "

The landlady became impatient.

" Instead o' wastin' any more time, you'd better get through to the Folkestone police, George Johnson. If you don't, *I* will." And she made a move as though to put her threat into action.

" Leave it to me, Mrs. 'Amble ; I'll ring up Folkestone. Although, at the same time, it do seem 'ard that when there's a good case like this goin', I should be deprived o' the credit."

" Credit ! Time enough for you to talk about

‘credit,’ my man, when you’ve done something ! ”

“ You give me a clue, and I’ll soon do something, Mrs. ‘Amble.”

“ Clue ! ” repeated the landlady scornfully ; “ I’ve told you all I know. If you was any good at this detective business, you’d find the clues for yourself.” Then she suddenly stopped, as though thinking hard. “ Who’s up at that ‘ White ‘Ouse ’ ? ”

“ ‘ The White ‘Ouse ’ ? You don’t think that anybody there could ‘ave ‘ad anything to do with this ‘ere affair ? ”

“ I don’t know. ‘Twas very peculiar—but, there, I don’t suppose you’d ‘ave sense enough to understand if I told you.”

“ Told me what ? ”

“ Well, I might as well,” decided Mrs. Hamble. “ When this young gen’lman—Padden ‘e said ‘is name was, as I’ve already told you—first spoke to me, ‘e seemed very anxious to know the kind o’ people who lived in the neighbourhood. I was able to tell ‘im a good deal about most of ‘em, and ‘e seemed particularly struck on the folk at ‘ The White ‘Ouse.’ ”

“ Ah ! ” commented the constable, sucking his pencil. “ But you’re not goin’ to tell me, Mrs

'Amble, that you've got any suspicion about that there Mr. Stevensson—a nicer gen'lman I never come across."

" P'raps not—but, then, you ain't come across many, 'ave you? And, talkin' about ' The White 'Ouse,' what about that big foreigner with the nasty-lookin' face? "

" Ah! " The constable supplied his usual comment, and reapplied himself to the end of his pencil. " I don't mind tellin' you, Mrs. 'Amble, that 'e looks capable o' doin' anything. But it 'ud take more nerve than I've got to go up there layin' any sort o' charge against 'im to Mr. Stevensson."

" Afraid to do your dooty, then? "

" I can't say as 'ow it *is* me dooty until I've got something definite to go on."

The landlady terminated the conversation by pointing to the door of her private sitting-room, which opened out into the hall that led in turn to the street.

" There's a mystery 'ere, and it's got to be cleared up," she declared; " you get on to the telephone to Folkestone. I'm goin' to 'ave 'eavy damages out o' somebody for all the nuisance I've been put to. Besides, I took a real fancy to that young Mr. Padden, an' it grieves me to

She had found the two other bedrooms in that state of chaos, with both her lodgers gone. Her^{er} was a mystery indeed ! And not only mystery, but disgrace. Mrs. Hamble had the feeling of the average good English housewife of having her possessions polluted after a forced entry by strangers.

Directly after swallowing a cup of tea, she had sent for Johnson, the village constable ; but her mortification was increased by the news that Joe brought back. The constable had been called away the previous afternoon to the bedside of a dying brother-in-law ; his wife did not know exactly when he would return, but expected him about dinner-time.

“ You go straight back now, Joe,” Mrs. Hamble had directed, “ and tell her I want to see ’im the minute ’e comes back. Don’t say what for, or it’ll be all over the village in no time. Just let ’er know I want to see George Johnson urgent.”

“ Yes, mam,” said the stolid Joe, whose expression signified that even murder and sudden death meant nothing in his daily round.

The constable had not turned up until after Mrs. Hamble had eaten her midday meal.

Now, as she stood looking down the practically

thwarted street, thinking over the recent somewhat unsatisfactory interview with him, she noticed a girl approaching from the direction of the station. The girl, who appeared to be a stranger, was walking slowly, and taking quick glances from side to side. Upon seeing the landlady she seemed to come to a decision, and hurried up to her.

"Are you looking for anyone, miss?" asked Mrs. Hamble, in her usual friendly manner.

The girl opened her mouth to speak, and then swayed slightly forward.

"My dear!" exclaimed the landlady, extending her arm. If she had not done so, the other would probably have fallen.

Making an obvious effort, the stranger now made a request.

"May I sit down for a minute?"

"Come inside, my dear; you look to me as though you're in trouble. And perhaps you want some food. Is that it?"

There was no reply; and Mrs. Hamble, very perplexed, waited until her unexpected visitor was seated in a comfortable chair.

"I'll make you a cup of tea," she said; "you'll feel better then, and, if you like, you can tell me what's the matter."

The combination of the speaker's kindness and honest face resulted in Margery Ferguson overcoming her natural hesitation and pouring out her trouble. Within ten minutes, Mrs. Hamble was in possession of a certain vital fact. This was that the girl was searching for a young man whom she believed had come to Mandling recently. And from her description, Mrs. Hamble had no difficulty in identifying this man as one of her lodgers who had been spirited away the previous night.

To tell the girl the whole truth, however, was not to be considered at the present moment, she decided. The child could not stand it.

"But there's no need for you to worry, my dear," she said; "I can tell you about that young man of yours."

The girl flushed.

"You can?" she asked eagerly.

"Of course!" went on the landlady, warming to her subject; "why, 'e actually stayed 'ere last night!"

"In this inn?"

Mrs. Hamble, somewhat troubled by the expression of thankfulness she had caused to leap into the girl's face, nodded.

"Then, where is he now?" asked the visitor.

“ I don't know exactly that, my dear ; he went out without saying where 'e was going. But don't you worry, everything will be all right. All you've got to do is to wait here until 'e comes back.”

Heaving a sigh, the girl, with that, seemed content.

CHAPTER
XVIII

ABE GOLDSCHMIDT
AT HOME

PERHAPS the most curious of the many curious things appertaining to Abe Goldschmidt was the fact that scarcely anyone in London knew of his existence. No one, that is, moving among the leisured and supposedly cultured classes. As regards the underworld, that was an entirely different matter.

For a man like Abe Goldschmidt to be living in one of London's busiest streets, and for the fact to go unchronicled in the Argus-eyed newspaper press was certainly remarkable. For, only five years previously, the name of Goldschmidt had been blazoned in screaming head-lines throughout the world. He had been called "the amazing crook-lawyer," as well as many other things; and he had issued no writs for libel for the very simple reason that the appellation had been strictly correct.

For twenty years prior to that, this curious personality had been one of the best known

figures in America. On that famous street, Broadway, he was so familiar that scarcely an issue of any journal priding itself on an appeal to the populace missed printing his name.

He was the criminals' best friend. Thief, murderer, blackmailer, crook of any description, male or female, when in trouble they all went to Abe. And, pulling a string here, and another one there, Abe, the Marvellous, somehow or other got them out of the difficulty. From the very jaws of Sing-Sing and the New York County Penitentiary he could pluck them. A very strange but powerful man, Abe, of whom had been written with truth: "He was not a great criminal, as the description is usually understood, but a man who stood behind and profited by the vices of others. As an office-boy serving a famous divorce lawyer, his shrewdness gave him the opportunity that many seek but few find. Almost before he had reached legal manhood, he was called to the Bar and became, later, the partner of his old employer—sought after, flattered, feared. A light of the tenderloin, a prominent figure at every first night, the friend and confidant of the great stars of the stage, familiar to the habitués of every race-track and gambling-house, this little man with the very big

head was for years one of the sights of New York City."

But, even in America, an end was bound to come to this astonishing career. A great scandal arose out of a divorce suit, and Goldschmidt became heavily involved. Charged with having instigated a certain witness to commit perjury, he was indicted and brought to trial.

The world loves a "character"—and Abe Goldschmidt certainly came under this description. Now that everyone knew that he was in dire trouble, he received hundreds of letters and telegrams urging him to keep his spirit up in the fight that lay before him. But, in spite of his legal chicanery, he was eventually sentenced to a term of imprisonment.

After ten months he was released. But Abe had had enough. There were to be no more appearances in court for him—not even as counsel for the defence. Slipping away from his native country so unostentatiously that few, except one or two intimate friends, knew that he had gone, he arrived in London, took a flat just off Baker Street and lived there, so far as the great world was concerned, in the strictest seclusion.

There were two entrances to this flat of Goldschmidt's. One was the orthodox way, and

through this came a few of his friends and acquaintances—the doctor who attended him, his banker, and so on ; but at the back, there passed through a shabby, unpainted door that would have escaped notice to any but the searching eye, a succession of men whose manner was furtive as they disappeared into the building. These came not only by day, but at all hours of the night, for Abe, although in retirement, had found it impossible to break his old habits. Although now in bad health, he persisted in sleeping in fitful starts ; and, providing that the people who came had something sufficiently interesting to tell him, he never turned his back upon a visitor.

For that was the nature of the man : he had lived so long with excitement at his elbow that, though his nerves were shattered, he felt compelled to keep up an illicit acquaintance with the underworld. In spite of the fact that thousands of miles separated him from his old haunts, many scraps of information dealing with the New York streets and the criminals who infested them, where whispered into his ear.

There was a bearer of tidings with him now—a big, upstanding man who did not descend to stealth, but spoke like one whose every word was a challenge. And yet Tim Hogan was “ wanted ”

for three murders—the police called them murders—back in America.

“ I tell you I saw it with my own eyes, Abe,” he was saying now for the second time ; “ there was I ”—a hint of Irish brogue now that he was becoming excited—“ standing on the very kerb. And they got the poor fellow into the car between them. One of them was Grosner, the fellow who works with Svensson. And the other, I think—damn it, I don’t think, I know—the other was the fellow they call ‘ The Doctor.’ Hartley his name is, isn’t it ? ”

The little, shrunken figure of the retired lawyer twisted on the cushions of the big chair which was now practically his prison-house. The news was like a breath of country-air to a sick man. It was something akin to the memory of the roars of applause that brings a flush of excitement to a faded stage star.

“ What could Grosner be doing with Charlie Whittle ? ” he asked. But the words were merely an echo of his thoughts ; that still keen brain was sifting the possibilities of the information that had been brought to him.

Tim Hogan waved both his huge hands in a gesture of impatience.

“ You ask me that, Abe—you ! Don’t you

remember that Charlie Whittle's been laying for Grosner for years? By rights, of course, I should be taking his side, he being a crook like meself; but, ach, the dirty snake!"

And this view, unorthodox as it might have appeared to seventy-five per cent. of the criminal underworld, was endorsed by the retired lawyer.

"Dick or not," he said, "I shall have to get Whittle away."

"You've said it!" declared Hogan excitedly; "and I'm the man to do it, don't forget."

"Do you know where he was taken? That's the first question."

"No—but I'll soon find out. There's ways and means."

"Of course." "Little" Abe, as he had been affectionately known in years gone by, gave the merest nod.

Grosner! Whittle, groaning in mortification, reflected how ironical it was that this old enemy should have appeared out of the blue in the way he had done. But that sudden and successful attack on him, he was convinced, had been prompted by something more than their old-time feud. The more he thought of it, the more positive he was that this American crook with

whom he had had so many brushes in the States had linked up with The Empress. That had been his first impression, and he was now certain it was correct.

Grosner was not taking any chances. The man was determined that he should be put out of action. Even if he had possessed the strength of a dozen men, he could not have freed himself : not only his hands and feet, but body as well, were strapped down. An eternity could pass without his being able to move more than an inch at a time.

This waiting was hellish. Although Whittle had no illusions about what would eventually happen to him, he found himself mentally praying for something to break this fiendish monotony. The cellar—or whatever it was into which he had been thrown : the place was almost pitch dark, so that he was not able to form any accurate guess—reeked with unpleasant odours ; every few seconds something wet dripped on to his face from above. . . . Much more of this, and he felt he would go mad.

What was that ? A step . . . Another . . . Then, from quite near, a cry that was bitten off at birth . . . Something was happening outside. But what ?

He strained again at his bonds, but it was useless. Death seemed very near at that moment—nearer than it had ever been before. And what an end—to be stuck between the ribs in that maddening gloom. . . .

Something creaked. Was it the door? He could not be sure, but there seemed a figure outlined, forming a darker patch than the rest of the room.

Quiet, stealthy, sinister footsteps.

Then :

“ Keep quiet,” came a tense whisper ; “ it’s Hogan. Tim Hogan. And I’ve come to get you away.”

As an involuntary cry started from Whittle’s lips, a hand was placed over his mouth.

CHAPTER XIX THE POLICE VISIT

DOWN at "The White House" a man raised a glass of wine and pledged himself. Simon Stevansson was sitting alone in his dining-room, indulging in a secret vice. Strange how it is that even the shrewdest men have their vulnerable point: Stevansson's liability was an unsuspected craving for alcohol. He had already finished one bottle, and was working his way steadily through a second.

After all, he might have argued, this was an occasion for drinking. On the one hand, satisfaction had to be expressed over Ferguson, the resident forger, having just turned in a marvellous piece of work; but, on the other hand, trouble appeared to loom on the horizon. There were flaws in the universe—and at such times in his criminal career Stevansson resorted to the sparkling contents of the bottle.

It was a period of tension. A tremendous coup was nearing completion; but he had to step warily. The fools sent on that job the night

before had bungled. They should have brought back two, not one.

Emptying his glass, he stretched out a right hand to the fire-place and pressed a bell.

"Bring the fellow Crane to me," he ordered.

Three minutes later, his narrow-set eyes were looking intently at the prisoner.

"I've got some questions to ask you, Crane—if that's your right name—and it'll be advisable for you to give me correct answers," he started.

Still watching the young man closely, he noticed that the prisoner was holding himself well in check. He quite evidently did not intend to tell too much. Well, if he didn't, there was Badoglio. . . .

Stevensson's assumption was correct. Crane's first overwhelming fit of passion had passed. He was up against it and his common sense told him that he would be merely playing into the enemy's hands by losing his temper again. He had to be cool. Perhaps, if he were "simple" enough, he would learn something that he could turn to account. In any case, precipitation would be fatal.

It was in this ice-packed mood, therefore, that he stood facing the man he would willingly have killed.

"Now for the questions," resumed Stevansson. "In the first place, I want to know why you are in this district at all."

That, in his assumed rôle of a Simple Simon, was fairly easy.

"The village was recommended to me. I came down here for a few days' rest."

"Indeed! Who recommended it, may I ask?"

"A friend of mine named Smith."

"Smith! I have already warned you not to lie."

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders.

"It isn't my fault if you don't believe what I say," he countered.

Stevansson poured himself another glass of wine.

"We'll get on," he said abruptly. "Granted that you came down here for—'a few days' rest'—why were you prowling round this house last night?"

"I was out for a walk."

"And, during that walk, you broke into private property—the grounds of this house?"

This took some answering, but, then, he remembered.

"I heard a scream—and thought someone was

being hurt or"—looking straight at his interrogator—"ill-treated."

"And you resolved to try a little rescuing—is that it?"

"I hadn't much time to think. I'm afraid I acted more or less on impulse."

Stevensson raised himself in his chair. His thin face looked vulpine.

"And the man who was with you?—was he also actuated by these unselfish motives?"

This was tricky ground. It would be useless to refuse to acknowledge the existence of Whittle; the only thing he could do was to pretend that the man was a stranger.

"You don't deny that you had a companion?" put in Stevensson swiftly.

This gave him an opening, which he eagerly seized.

"A fellow certainly did come up and speak to me outside this house last night, but I didn't know who he was."

"You know now, I believe?"

"He told me he was an American."

The cross-examiner flung his empty wine-glass with an oath into the grate. It smashed into fragments.

"I'm not going to waste any more time with

you, Crane," he said ; " you have certain information which I want, and unless you give it to me without this paltry fencing, you will bitterly regret it. You've just this one more chance before I call in someone whose influence on the matter you will find very effectual. . . .

" In order to refresh your apparent poor memory, let me put the case as concisely as possible. By a very curious coincidence, you became mixed up in my affairs. You were mistaken for a man who is very much like you in appearance, and brought to my house in London. Knowing quite well that an error had been made, why did you go ? "

" You'll probably be amused by what I am going to say," was the reply ; " but I did it for a lark."

" What ? "

" Yes, a lark. You see, I was fresh up from the country—Truro, I come from—and when I found myself in that extraordinary position, I thought I'd carry on with it just in order to discover what would happen. It promised to be exciting."

" It will be," was the grim answer ; " what's happened to you so far is trifling compared to the future, unless you're sensible—and stop this

lying. It was through the girl that you decided to go on with the affair. And a fine mug you were," his words now ringing with contempt ; " if you only knew how that girl bluffed you——! "

Before he could control himself, Philip had sprung forward his manacled hands uplifted to strike.

Stevensson merely smiled ; he had good reason, apparently, as before Crane could reach him, the would-be assailant was seized from behind and swept abruptly to the floor.

At that moment the telephone rang.

Stevensson took off the receiver in a jocular mood. But this soon changed.

It was The Empress speaking, and her words were cold and biting.

" You'd better prepare yourself," she said, " for a visit from the police. . . . No, don't interrupt ; listen to what I have to say. The fellow Crane—by the way, he's still there ? "

Satisfied at his reply, she went on :

" The man who was with Crane last night was the American detective, Whittle. Don't ask me what he's doing in England, because I don't know. It's sufficient that he's here. . . . Oh, I'm not mistaken ; I remember him from the *Carapanthia*—the Lowenstein affair. But he had

the nerve to call on me just now, pretending to be a man from Jardine's, the caterers. Said he'd come to make me a proposition: he knew where Crane was, and he advised me to ring up and order his release. If I didn't, he would know what to do, he said. That's why I tell you, Stevensson, that you'd better be prepared for a visit from the police. . . . No, I shan't be down to-day."

Before he could make any comment the woman had rung off.

Stevensson's thin face was livid as he turned away from the instrument.

"That was a call from London," he told the two men who had felled Crane to the floor. "The Empress says the police may come here. Take him," pointing to the prisoner, "and Ferguson downstairs. You understand—*downstairs*."

As the car sped up the drive, Simon Stevensson, fresh from a cold bath and a change of clothes, smoothed his tie and smiled like a man who, having made careful preparations, is ready to face a crisis. Let the fools come. . . .

A couple of minutes later, a shrewd-faced, keen-eyed man of middle-age, wearing a police inspector's uniform, and accompanied by two

obvious detectives, was shown into a well-furnished library. An immaculately dressed individual, giving every evidence of complete self-possession, rose to greet him.

" You are—Inspector Laidley—of the Folkestone police—what ? "

" That's right, sir. I've come over from Folkestone to make a few inquiries about a certain matter. It's very good of you to receive me." The words were pleasant enough, but beneath them was an undercurrent of determination.

" Oh, that's all right, Inspector," drawled his host ; " I don't quite know what I can do, but——" He broke off to look at the two plain-clothes officers standing by the door. " I must say, however, my dear fellow, that this invasion is somewhat overwhelming. I sincerely trust that I am not under any suspicion ? "

The uniformed visitor, before replying, made a sign to his men.

" Wait in the hall," he said.

He made no apology, and, to any ordinary man, the hint might have been disturbing. But Simon Stevesson remained very much master of himself. Why not ? He had completed his few arrangements.

"Sit down, won't you?" he went on to remark; "cigar?"

The visitor shook his head.

"Thank you—I won't smoke, Mr. Stevensson."

"Now, exactly what is the trouble, my dear Inspector?" asked the master of "The White House."

Laidley did not waste time.

"We have received information that a young man named Philip Crane, who arrived in Mandling from London yesterday, has mysteriously disappeared."

The eyes of the listener narrowed.

"And, assuming your information to be correct, why this descent upon myself, accompanied by two assistants?"

Laidley would have liked to have accepted the challenge in the spirit in which it was made, but he was too discreet.

"We are going through the neighbourhood," he replied, "calling at many places. From that, you will gather that this visit has no particular significance. We just want your word that you have not seen this young man."

His host yawned. "Why should I have seen him, my dear Inspector? I live a very secluded life here—seldom going out even into the grounds

—and I see no reason why this young fellow who takes it upon himself to disappear so mysteriously—to use your own words—should worry me with his presence. However, to relieve any possible anxiety on your part, I am quite willing to allow you and your assistants to search not only the grounds, but the entire house. You will then be completely satisfied, I have no doubt, that my humble abode will not require any more of your attention.”

The Folkestone police inspector gnawed with his strong teeth the fringe of his moustache. The man was a crook, right enough—but he was damned sure of himself. Perhaps someone had put him wise. Still, even at the risk of being scored off, he would have to make the search.

“Just as a matter of form, Mr. Svensson, I should like to go through the house. One can never tell in a case like this.”

“Really? These people who ‘disappear mysteriously’ have curious habits, no doubt. . . . Well, if you do find him trussed up in a cupboard, all covered with blood and things, you won’t forget to let me know, will you? . . . I’ll now give instructions to my butler.”

He rang a bell, and to the servant who appeared said :

"Graham, this gentleman wishes to go through the house and grounds. Apparently, some dreadful crime has been committed in the neighbourhood, and we are under suspicion."

The butler winced as though suffering a personal insult.

"Under suspicion, sir?"

"So it seems. You will give the inspector every facility for inspecting the entire house and grounds, Graham. That will do."

"This way," said the butler gloomily.

"I'll see you again before you leave, Inspector." Stevensson remained master of the situation until the end.

CHAPTER
XX

P.C. GEORGE SHERLOCK
JOHNSON HOLMES
SUPPLIES A CLUE

INSPECTOR LAIDLEY was very quiet during the journey from "The White House" to "The Jolly Sailor" inn. He had drawn blank—and he was far from being satisfied. Stevansson had fooled him somehow : there was a complete lack of incriminating evidence ; "The White House" might have been inhabited by an archbishop : on the surface, at least, the place was entirely above suspicion.

The Inspector was puzzled—and not only puzzled, but angry. Watson of the Yard had expected him to get results, and the last thing he wanted was to let his old friend down. But there it was ; he had paid his visit, made a thorough search, and nothing more could be done in that direction. Perhaps the visit at the inn would yield a better result, but he was certain, in spite of his recent non-success, that the focal point of the mystery was still to be found at "The White House."

The arrival of the car at the inn caused Mrs. Hamble to shake with excitement. This important-looking gentleman in uniform was a very different matter from poor plodding George Johnson, whose stupidity gave her increasing anger every time she thought about it.

"Mrs. Hamble?" asked the inspector.

"That's me, sir. You called about the affair last night, I s'pose? I told George Johnson to get on the telephone to you."

Inspector Laidley allowed a slight smile to pass over his stern face.

"George Johnson! Who on earth is George Johnson?"

"Why, 'e's the village copper—I mean policeman. I told 'im partic'lar to go straight back to the station and get on the telephone to you."

"My instructions came from Scotland Yard, Mrs. Hamble."

"Scotland Yard!" She spoke the words in impressed awe.

"Yes. Now, I want to get the full story from you. Please tell me everything that happened."

By this time they were in the landlady's private sitting-room, and Mrs. Hamble, still all of a flutter, was dusting the back of a chair with her apron.

"That's the most comfortable one," she remarked, seating herself opposite. "Well, it was like this: the young gentleman who said 'is name was Padden——"

"Padden? I understood it was Philip Crane."

"I don't know anything about that. He told me 'is name was Padden, and that 'e was recommended to Mandling by a man called Smith."

Afraid that her loquacity would swamp the material facts if he allowed her to continue, the inspector applied a closure.

"Crane or Padden, that doesn't matter so much at the moment. Perhaps he had a reason for giving you his wrong name. When did you first meet this young man?"

"Yesterday mornin', 'bout seven. 'E got 'ere in time for me to get 'im an early breakfast. A nice young fellow. An' when 'e said 'e wanted to stay a day or two, I was only too pleased to put 'im up. 'E began asking me questions about the neighbourhood right away, and I told 'im as much as I knew—especially about that 'orrid-lookin' foreigner livin' at 'The White 'Ouse.'"

Laidley stiffened.

"A man named Svensson lives there. I've just come from calling on him."

"Yes; but 'e's got a 'orrible-lookin' servant.

An Eytalian, or somethin'. Fair gives me the creeps every time I sees him."

"Was Mr. Padden particularly interested in 'The White House'?"

"'E seemed to be—as I told George Johnson only this mornin'. Appeared to 'ave somethin' on 'is mind, 'e did."

"Now, come to last night, Mrs. Hamble."

"Well, 'e went out just about dark, and when 'e came back, 'e 'ad another gentleman with 'im—a biggish fellow whose name 'e said was Green. Talked a bit American—you know, Inspector, like those people on the films. It 'appened that I 'ad the attic vacant, and I agreed to put this man Green up as well." In reply to further promptings, the landlady proceeded to relate how she was awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of a struggle in the next room; how she endeavoured to leave her own bedroom, but found the door locked against her; how she then broke a window-pane in the hope of attracting attention from a late passer-by; and how, being forced to wait until the arrival of Joe at seven o'clock that morning, she had immediately sent for the village constable.

"An' that's all I do know," she wound up.
"But it's upset me so much that I can't tell

whether I'm standin' on me 'ead or me 'eels. What does it all mean, Inspector? 'E was a nice enough young fellow. What does anyone want to do 'im any 'arm for? Oh, I forgot to tell you," she added quickly; "there is some-thin' else. This afternoon, who should arrive 'ere but a young lady. From what I can make out, she's a great friend of this Mr. Padden—or Crane, or whatever 'is name is. Would you like to see 'er, Inspector?"

"I would."

So it happened that, in spite of all her precautions, Margery Ferguson found herself, a couple of minutes later, facing a police officer. At the sight of the inspector's uniform, she trembled violently.

"There's no need for you to be alarmed, young lady," said Laidley kindly; "I'm here to help you—to try to solve the mystery of your friend's disappearance. May I ask your name?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then said in a whisper:

"Ferguson—Margery Ferguson."

Mrs. Hamble, standing behind, patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there, child; don't take on so. We both want to help you, don't we, Inspector?"

"I have already told Miss Ferguson so."

"You are very kind," returned the girl.
"But what do you mean about my friend's disappearance? Mrs. Hamble was telling me that he has merely gone out for a walk, and that he's certain to come back here."

Over the speaker's shoulder the inspector caught the eye of the landlady.

The latter made her apology.

"I daren't tell her the truth when she first came—she was that upset——"

Margery sprang up.

"The truth? What is the truth?" she pleaded; "I must know. Mr. Crane came down here to try to find my father—to rescue him——"

Laidley felt he was gaining ground.

"Sit down again, Miss Ferguson, and try not to agitate yourself. As I have already said, I'm here to help you. What's this about your father? Who is your father? And what is he doing in Mandling?"

"Must I tell you?"

"It would be better so. I'm quite sure there is nothing you need fear."

"But there is—my father——" She broke down completely.

The inspector signalled Mrs Hamble, and the

latter left the room, returning quickly with some smelling-salts. After these had been placed to the girl's nostrils, she revived.

"You must tell me the whole story, Miss Ferguson," now said Laidley; "don't distress yourself; take your time; but don't forget any detail. It may be very important."

"But first of all, tell me where Mr. Crane is."

"We don't know—that's why I want you to tell me all you can. It may give me a valuable clue."

"But if I do, my father—you may put him in prison."

The inspector rapped his finger nails with a pencil he had taken from his pocket.

"It is more essential than ever that you should tell me your story now, Miss Ferguson," he said. There was a hint of inflexibility in his voice which she could not mistake.

She sat for a moment with her head between her hands. The very thing which she had avoided for so long had taken place. But, having admitted so much, she supposed she must keep on.

"Very well," she said at length; "I will tell you."

"The whole story?"

"The whole story."

"In return, I will do everything I possibly can for your father."

"Thank you," she replied; and made no further quibble.

"Some weeks ago, my father left the rooms in Harlesden where we were living, without a word to me. A man with cold, cruel eyes and a thin, grey face——"

"Stevensson!" muttered Laidley to himself.
"Sorry, Miss Ferguson; please go on."

"This man came inquiring for my father. I was told to leave the room. When I came back father had gone. I feel sure that man who called was a criminal."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have only my intuition to go upon, but if father had gone away on an honest purpose, he would have wished me good-bye. He would have written——"

"Hasn't he written?"

"Only a note with a few words on it. It was headed 'Mandling,' and said: 'Come and help me.'"

"Was this from your father?"

"Yes—it was in his handwriting."

"When did you get this letter?"

" Five days ago."

" What did you do ? "

" What *could* I do ? "

" Didn't you go to the police ? "

" No. I had the same fear then as I have now—that if father could be traced, he might be arrested. That was why I stayed in London ; I knew I could do nothing on my own. And I was being watched then. I moved from Harlesden and took a room in Pimlico."

" Now tell me about the young man Crane," went on the inspector. " How did you meet him ? "

In slow, measured words, Margery detailed the second part of her narrative.

" It was because I was afraid for his sake that I ran away from the convent to-day," she added ; " and now——" She made a desperate appeal to the inspector : " You must find him—you must save him ! "

Laidley, hand propping up chin, nodded.

" We shall find him all right ; don't you worry about that, Miss Ferguson."

" But he may be dead ! "

" Then the man who killed him will hang—rest assured."

" Mrs. 'Amble ! " called a voice from without.

" Mrs. 'Amble ! "

"That's that George Johnson. Would you like to see 'im, Inspector?"

"Do you mean the local policeman?"

"That's 'im—George Johnson." Raising her voice, she called in reply: "Come on in, George Johnson. 'Ere's the inspector from Folkestone wants to see you."

Laidley seemed about to make some protest, but by this time, heavy footsteps were heard outside, and the next moment the blundering form of the village constable thrust itself into view.

P.C. Johnson made a clumsy attempt at a salute and then removed his helmet to disclose a steaming forehead.

"Thank goodness you've come, Inspector. I rang up Folkestone, an' they told me as 'ow you 'ad already started."

The inspector turned round in his chair.

"I understand that you've been investigating this case, Johnson; have you got any clue?"

"Not a h'inch of a clue; it's all as dark as night to me. Mrs. 'Amble 'ere sez as 'ow she thinks that gen'leman h'up at 'The White 'Ouse' 'as got somethin' to do with it; but I can't see as 'ow that can be. I knows the gen'leman in question. 'E allus sez 'good mornin'' to me pleasant like. I can't think as 'ow 'e could 'ave

anythin' to do with this 'ere affair. O' course, there's that Eyetalian 'e 'as 'angin' round—a narsty lookin' creature, as Mrs. 'Amble says; but——”

The inspector stopped the rush of words.

“ How long have you lived in this district, Johnson ? ”

“ All me life. I was born at Hythe, and came 'ere when I was ten years old.”

“ And that is—how long ago ? ”

“ Thirty-seven years come November.”

“ What do you know about ‘ The White House ’ ? ”

“ Not much. O' course, 'twas builded on a ruin.”

“ A ruin ? ”

“ Yes. Years and years ago there was a kind o' a monastery, they do say, and the remains were knocked down by the gen'leman who builded ‘ The White 'Ouse ’—a Mr. Farrant 'e was, from Southampton. A very rich man—an' terr'ble fond o' 'is wine. 'E used the cellars to keep the bottles in, an'——”

Inspector Laidley rose from his chair so impetuously that he sent it flying.

“ Thank you, Johnson,” he said ; “ you've given me just the information I wanted.”

P.C. Johnson blinked.

“ W’ot on earth ’ave I done now ? ” he inquired.

“ You’ve given me what I think is the solution to this mystery,” was the reply.

“ The Lord save me ! ”

CHAPTER XXI THE HOUSE OF DEATH

THE air was raw, and he felt a chill in his bones. So this underground vault was what Stevansson had meant when he said "downstairs."

He had been hustled by the two men down a flight of stone steps, the covering of which was so cleverly masked by wooden flooring that no one could possibly have suspected their existence, and then pitched forward so that his outstretched hands, still held by the manacles, were cut and bruised.

This was the end, apparently; it might be that after the visit of the police, Stevansson would order him to be killed. With a big *coup* nearing completion, it was not likely that such a ruthless crook would harbour any mercy towards a man who was in his way and, providing he once escaped, could do him no end of mischief.

Struggling to his feet, Philip leaned against the damp wall and looked across the cellar towards the door through which he had been hurled.

A wild hope surged through him momentarily

as he saw this open again. But any idea of escape was quickly dispelled: one of the men who had so roughly handled him stood in the doorway, a revolver pointing in his direction.

The jailer was not alone. He was leading a bent, shrunken wretch with a weak, pitiable face from which had disappeared any semblance of manhood. Philip recognised him immediately: it was the girl's father—the forger.

"Someone to talk to," growled the jailer; and, with a harsh laugh, slammed the door after him.

Ferguson shambled forward.

"Who are you?" he asked in a weak voice; "are you in the hands of these devils like myself?"

Before replying, Crane reflected how strange was this circumstance: he had promised the girl that he would find her father—but how ironical that the two should meet like this! Fellow prisoners, waiting—unless he was very much mistaken—for a quick but merciless death.

He tried to put some courage into the stricken wretch.

"Yes—but we'll be all right; you see if we're not. The police have got their suspicions about this place, and they're coming here to make a search."

Instead of giving the other confidence, the words seemed to unnerve him still more.

"The police coming here! My God, do you know what that'll mean? I shall be killed . . . they'll never run the risk of me being found! I—I've been doing some work for them."

Crane's pity overrode his contempt.

"They wouldn't have the nerve to kill you," he said; "look here: you couldn't do anything with these, I suppose?" He held up his handcuffed wrists.

Ferguson started back. His whole body shook.

"If they've done that to you," he said; "what will they do to me?"

"Pull yourself together," Crane found himself saying; "they shan't hurt you while I'm here," he went on, endeavouring once again to instal some spirit into his companion. "If only I could get my hands free——"

Moved by the words, the other examined the manacles.

He shook his head.

"It's impossible to get those off without a key," he said. "We'll just have to wait—that's all. My God, the police! . . . " he went on, muttering to himself.

Philip imagined he knew full well why the

speaker should be afraid of the police, but, with a fresh feeling of pity, he touched the forger on the arm.

"Why don't you sit down?" he asked; "there's a dry patch over there. You look as though you want some rest."

"Rest! I wish I could die!" was the reply.

"That's nonsense! Look here, I've got something to tell you: I met your daughter in London."

The lack-lustre eyes stared at him.

"My daughter! You mean—Margery?"

"Yes. Now, don't you worry—she told me about her trouble, and I took her to a place of safety. Svensson was trying to get hold of her—don't you worry," he repeated, as the other crumpled and staggered against the wall; "I tell you she's quite all right; I took her to a convent."

"You're not deceiving me?"

"Of course I'm not! I'm telling you the truth. Why should I want to lie to you—aren't we in the same boat? It was through your daughter that I came down here. I promised to find you, and, if possible, get you away. It doesn't look as though I've been very successful! . . . But we're not beaten yet. Something'll turn

up, you see. These swine won't be allowed to have it all their own way."

A sound outside made Ferguson raise a hand.

"Don't talk any more," he whispered; "some-one may be listening. But, thank you, my friend."

He seemed about to add something else, but the head drooped on his chest, the body sagged, and then, with a gentle sliding movement, it slumped to the floor—and lay still.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Crane anxiously.

There was no reply—no sound save his own heart beating rapidly.

Oh, God, to get his hands free! Walking across the uneven floor, he knelt and endeavoured as best he could—although that was clumsy enough—to feel if there was any movement in the man's breast. But, quickly, he realised the truth: this weakling, who, in spite of his failings, perhaps deserved pity, had gone across the Border.

He was dead

In a room above, Stevensson was facing a visitor.

"Why have you come here?" he asked.

Judith Felstead winced at the crudity of the question. Here was another enemy, then.

"I've come to tell you what has happened," she replied. "The Empress has turned against me. I taxed her with it this morning. She pretended otherwise, but I know the truth: she intends to get rid of me."

The eyes of Svensson were very cold.

"Why should I interfere?" he asked.

"You say that, Simon?—after all that has happened?"

"What do you expect me to do?"

He was parrying with her, his lips were uttering words that had no meaning. It was only his eyes that could be relied upon. And these were deadly—full of a cold, cruel hate.

She realised now she had been a fool to come. The fate which, to her own knowledge, had overtaken so many others who had worked for that mistress of crime who, living in luxury in Mayfair, spread her net so wide that men and women hundreds and even thousands of miles away shivered at the nickname which had been given her, had now caught even her up. She had outlived her usefulness—therefore, she was to be outcast.

Where could she turn now that the man in

whom she had trusted had allied himself with the enemy? In that moment of revelation she knew she must get away. There was danger for her here. The room seemed to be filled with a miasmatic vapour that was filling her throat . . . choking her . . . Through this mythical mist she could see Svensson, his eyes now mere slits, staring at her hostilely.

Yes, she must get away—and quickly. If there had been any lingering doubt before, it was dispelled. Her fate had been sealed. They wished her gone—perhaps dead. There could be no appeal; it would be useless to waste any further words.

Svensson spoke now; and what he said came as a full corroboration of her fears.

“ You won’t be able to get out that way, Judith—not yet, at any rate. You have a nerve to come down here—*you spy!* ”

“ Spy! ”

“ None of your sob-stuff. Listen: Grosner telephoned just now to say he saw you talking to that American dick outside The Empress’s house this morning. After what you told him, Whittle went to Scotland Yard; Scotland Yard phoned to the Folkestone police—and they’ve just paid a visit here. What do you say to that? ”

"It's all a damned lie. I didn't tell anything to Whittle, or whatever his name is. I just asked him what he wanted?"

"And you expect me to believe that?" was the sneer. "Look here, you've been getting in wrong for some time. Oh, I don't mean that Crane business—before that. You've been too independent, asking too many questions, expecting too big a share. Do you imagine The Empress didn't know? And do you think she's the woman to stand that sort of thing? You've been a fool, and now you'll have to suffer for it."

How futile to attempt to argue. He was building up a case against her monstrous in its falsity. She had done none of these things. It was simply that they were tired of her, and this was always the way they got rid of people they considered no longer useful.

"Leave me alone; I'm going to get away."

"Are you?" he commented derisively. And before she could put a hand in her bag, he had brought from his coat pocket a thing of dulled steel. One shot—and it was over.

There was a tap on the door.

"Yes?"

"Birchall," was the reply.

" You can't come in yet—wait." The speaker arranged the screen to his satisfaction and then walked to the mantelpiece. He pressed the higher of two bell pushes, and the door opened.

" What's the idea ? " asked the American ;
" something private going on ? "

Stevensson, a sinister figure, stood looking at him from the hearth-rug in front of the fire-place.

" I'm the only one who is allowed to ask questions in this house," he replied ; " please remember that."

" Is that so ? " drawled the other, with a show of confidence he by no means felt ; " well, nevertheless, I think I must put a few queries to you, Stevensson. Directly I got back just now, friend Badoglio, the Big Cheese, spilled one or two whispers in my ear. What he told me didn't sound too nice—the dicks have been here, haven't they ? "

" Yes—and gone again. What are you afraid of ? "

" Me, afraid ? Say, laugh it off ! But I think I've got a right to know what's happened, anyway. Are they coming back ? "

" How should I know ? They came, they went through the place, they saw nothing—isn't that good enough ? "

"I don't know. Might be all right for the dicks in America. But these English are a persevering lot. Simps, perhaps, but too much of the bulldog in them to please me. You may think you've got them bluffed, but they pull a come-back just when you're not expecting it. My advice is to clear out and take Ferguson with us. It's only a few miles to the coast, and we might get a motor-boat across to France."

"Cut it out," was the contemptuous answer ; "if you haven't got any guts, I hope I have. No damned policeman is going to frighten me away from my own house. Here I am, and here I'm going to stay until this job's over. When Ferguson's done his second piece of work, I'll think about it. But not till then."

"In that case," said Birchall, "I also hang my hat up."

Stevensson made no immediate comment. He could read this man. Birchall's reputation had preceded him. This American was never one to take the hardest way. He always went when the going was good, and, unless he was very much mistaken, he was going now.

"Please yourself," he said curtly at length ; "if you're a rat, go. If you're a man, stay. It's up to you. But listen here : if you do go, it's

for good. Understand that? There'll be no more working for us in the future. There's no danger, in spite of all your hot air. The police have been—and found nothing. How many more times do you want me to tell you? ”

“ That's all right,” was the meant-to-be-easy response ; “ in our game a guy has got to consider all the chances. But if you're satisfied, I am.” He turned to go.

Stevensson sent this after him :

“ There's no coming back, mind, Birchall.”

“ Who's going? ” drawled the other, and sauntered out of the room.

Stevensson did not trouble to have the man watched. Snake he might be, but, in considering his own skin, he would take care not to give anyone else away. If he went, he would be off immediately, like an animal in a jungle, leaving no trace.

FOR once, however, Stevansson was wrong in his estimate of human character. It was true that Birchall intended to get away—danger's firing-line had never been any place for him—but there was one call he was going to make before he left England. A fast car, driven recklessly, took him to a house in Curzon Street in just over two and a half hours.

Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair was in, according to the servant to whom he gave his name, and she would receive him at once.

The Empress was an imposing figure as he bowed himself into her presence.

"Well, Birchall?"

"I've come to give you the tip to get away, Empress," he started, without any preamble. "The police have been to 'The White House'—and, very likely, are coming again."

"I dare say," was the reply; "in fact, I

telephoned the information to Svensson this afternoon. Why the agitation ? ”

“ I’ll tell you, Empress. Svensson is too cocksure. There’s no reason why he should hang on there, as I’ve told him ; the place is dangerous. Once the police get their claws in, you know what it is. Svensson has bluffed them once. This afternoon, he gave them permission to search throughout the house and grounds——”

“ And they found nothing.”

“ That’s right. But they’ll come again. They can’t be put off as easily as that. I tried to reason with Svensson, but he wouldn’t listen. So I’ve come to you.”

“ Thinking of your own skin ? ”

“ Not entirely. If I had done that, I should have slipped down to Folkestone and got across to France to-night. Instead of that, I’ve come to you. Empress, let me advise you. Don’t play your hand too hard ; if the police once get a clue down at ‘ The White House ’—if they find Ferguson, he’ll spill the beans ; he’ll tell them about you—and then all your plans will be blown sky-high. Up till now you’ve been lucky—wonderfully, marvellously lucky—but there comes a time when a little cog goes wrong, and the whole wheel is stopped. You should know that.”

For reply, the woman blew a thin cloud of cigarette smoke.

"If I leave London, this business, which may be worth a million, will be finished."

"If you don't leave, *you'll* be finished," said Birchall, using a more dominating tone than he had ever dared before.

She remained silent for several seconds.

"I'll telephone," she said finally.

"Yes," he urged; "tell Stevensson to meet us in Paris. We'll go by 'plane from Croydon. They can dope Ferguson, or"—quickly—"finish him off."

"You stupid fool!" blazed the woman; "don't you realise what Ferguson means to us? He hasn't done his job yet. Without Ferguson the whole thing falls to the ground."

Birchall's nerves were getting the better of him, and he snapped his fingers irritably.

"All I trouble about is getting away," he said. "I was lucky at Southampton, but I'm not going to take too many chances. I've been a fool, perhaps, to stay in England so long."

The Empress's back, as she turned, was eloquent of contempt.

Now she was at the telephone.

"I want Trunks, please," she said; "Mandling

—M-a-n-d-l-i-n-g—yes—in Kent—017. Have you got that? Mandling 017. Quickly, please—I'm in a hurry."

Over by the window, through which he kept looking, Birchall fidgeted. It was as though he was expecting to see in the street below his terror take material shape. Meanwhile, seated at her bureau, The Empress calmly studied documents.

Only once did she speak.

"Either sit down or leave the room," she ordered curtly.

Silence, disturbed only by the rustle of papers as she turned them over.

After three minutes he rushed across the room.

"What are we hanging about here for?" he asked; and, before she could reply, he had ripped the receiver off its hook and inquired angrily: "What about that trunk call to Mandling? Have we to wait all night?"

The Empress rose and took the instrument from his shaking grasp. With the unoccupied hand she motioned him to a chair.

"Yes," he heard her say; "what's that? . . . No reply? . . . Are you sure? . . ."

Birchall waited no longer. He was up in his chair and clawing at her sleeve.

"Don't you get it?" he shrieked; "the police—the police!"

And, as though he had been gifted with second sight, the door opened.

"I am Superintendent Watson, of Scotland Yard," said a deep voice.

"I told you!" whined Birchall. But The Empress ignored the words.

She faced the unexpected visitor with calm hauteur.

"And I am Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair," she said; "I demand to know the reason for this intrusion."

The reply came promptly.

"We have received information that a young gentleman named Mr. Philip Crane is missing—and that you are concerned with his disappearance."

"I am concerned? You must be joking."

"On the contrary, I am very serious, madam—so serious, in fact, that I must request you to accompany me to Scotland Yard." He moved swiftly to one side as Birchall attempted to brush past him.

"And you, too, sir. Thoms!" raising his voice."

A younger man, also dressed in plain clothes, came quickly from the hall.

"We have a cab outside, and there'll be no display. If you behave sensibly, no one need be any the wiser," the Superintendent now said, turning once again to the woman.

The words were casually uttered, but The Empress knew their import. Once at the Yard she would never get away. Bluff as she might, the net would be close around her.

"I refuse to accompany you," she said; "this is an insult, and I shall speak to my solicitors."

"You can speak to them after you have visited the Yard," was the inflexible reply; "it's my duty to warn you that if you refuse to come with me, you will be taken by force."

She looked quickly round the room, but the Superintendent was already by her side.

"Very well," she said; "but someone will suffer for this."

Superintendent Watson raised a hand to his moustache. It was the nearest approach he ever made to a smile.

CHAPTER XXIII THE SECOND CALL

DETERMINED as he was, Simon Stevansson knew that time was valuable. He had pretended to ignore Birchall's words, but he realised clearly that the British police, once they took up an inquiry, never relaxed their hold. So far, he had gained the honours—but, brooding over the matter, he became more and more convinced that there would be a second visit to "The White House" that night. He must be prepared.

To the servant who answered the bell, he said :

"Ferguson is in the cellar ; bring him to me."

If he went away—and he was allowing the idea to sink in—it would be necessary for him to take the forger with him. For Ferguson's work was only half done ; there remained a good deal to be finished.

His plans in this direction were rudely shattered.

"Ferguson is dead," announced the returned servant.

Stevansson rose swiftly and walked up to the man.

"What's that you say?" he demanded.

"Ferguson's dead—he's conked out."

"Dead? But who killed him?"

"Not that other fellow. When I went down there, he was nearly blubbing. No, it wasn't murder—I reckon that Ferguson must have had a weak heart, and shoving him downstairs completed the job. What shall we do with the body?"

Stevensson did not reply immediately. Ignoring the man, he paced up and down the room. It would seem as though his luck was giving out—that the cards were stacked against him. If only Whittle had been captured by Grosner before he had given that information to Scotland Yard! It was no good reflecting upon that now, however; this was a situation for a man—and he had to face it.

To stay or go? That was the question. With Ferguson dead, it would certainly seem as though he had better slip across to France for a while. He would ring up The Empress.

The man still standing in the doorway attracted his attention again.

"What shall we do with the body, boss?"

A third voice answered.

"I think you had better leave it where it is until we see it."

During the next ten seconds Stevensson did the quickest thinking of his life.

"So you're here again, Mr. Laidley," he remarked. "I thought somehow you might turn up once more."

The Folkestone police officer disregarded the pleasantry.

"We'll cut out the compliments, Mr. Stevensson, and concentrate on your *cellars*." He underlined the last word and had the satisfaction of seeing the man wince. "I'm afraid I overlooked your downstairs department the first time I was here. Very careless of me, I'm sure, but I intend to rectify that now. Matthews!" he called; and an assistant stepped forward.

"Watch this man," was the order he received.

Stevensson kept control of himself.

"You prefer me, then, not to be your guide, Inspector?"

"We'll find out everything—this time," was the significant response. "This fellow will do." He pointed to the man who, a minute before, had brought his tale of tragedy to Stevensson. He was not a free agent now; by a dexterous manœuvre his hands had been pinioned behind him by a second detective, and a pair of handcuffs slipped round his wrists.

"As you please, my dear Inspector," remarked the host; "but, nevertheless, I think it is only fair to say that I shall register a protest in the proper quarters against this high-handed action of yours. I won't waste words by saying that you have no justification for your suspicion, either against me, or my house. By the way, I suppose you have the usual warrant?"

"In a case like this no warrant is necessary. I am acting on my own responsibility and with a full sense of what I am doing."

"Very well; Gregory, please do whatever the inspector wishes. Obey him as you would me. You understand?"

The man lowered his head in a gesture of acquiescence. Had he not done so, his eyes might have told their own story.

"And no monkey tricks," added Laidley.

"Tut, tut!" mocked Svensson; "I ask you, Inspector, what three able-bodied men have to fear?"

"On this trip I'm taking no chances," was the curt reply; "you might let me know where your Italian body-servant is. I've heard a lot about that fellow recently, and I should like to see him."

"He's about the place somewhere, I have no

doubt. Do you know where to find him, Gregory ? ”

“ The last time I saw him—about half an hour ago—he told me he was going to the village.”

“ Well, he can wait. Lead on, my lad, to these cellars of yours. It came out quite by chance, Stevensson, that this house was built on the ruins of a monastery. I suppose you weren’t aware of that fact ? ”

“ You are adding to my stock of knowledge every minute, Inspector.”

With a short growl the police officer turned away.

Once outside the door he and his companion were joined by a comical-looking constable—P.C. George Johnson to wit. Johnson, in a laudable endeavour to meet any emergency, had already drawn his truncheon.

“ You stay here, Johnson, and attend to anybody who comes in or attempts to go out.” Laidley would have wished for a more reliable addition to his staff, but he had to put up with this material as being the best available.

“ Yes, Inspector.”

With the handcuffed guide going before them, the small party crossed the hall, went down a

stairway, and entered a passage that apparently led to the kitchen quarters.

"The wine cellar's down there," the man said, pointing to the wooden floor.

Laidley nodded. He had a horrible suspicion that he was about to be made a fool of. He had merely his own intuition and the information of that fool of a constable upon which to go.

He spoke brusquely.

"I want to see it—not to be told where it is."

The man touched something with his foot, and the floor opened slowly.

Stretching down could be seen a flight of steps. A cold, raw air came up to them from below.

CHAPTER XXIV THE MISSING MEN

STEVENSSON maintained his good-humoured poise after the door had closed. In fact, he smiled at the man who had been told to watch him.

"This is very stupid, you know," he said ;
"very stupid indeed. Do you mind telling me if I'm actually under suspicion ? "

"I'm not here to talk," was the uncompromising answer.

"Dear me ! How very trying to be a detective ! Do you go about all day with that grim look on your face—what ? Really most disfiguring. However, it's your life work, I suppose—and there's an end to it. Is it permissible to ask you to have a drink ? "

"It is not." The tone was as chilly as before. Yet if ever a man in this world wanted a drink, it was the speaker. The air was raw, and this fellow gave him a cold sensation down his back. He seemed scarcely human, with those narrow, glinting eyes and pale, ferret-like face. He

wanted watching all right—but he wished the Chief had given the job to somebody else.

“ You seem the embodiment of all the virtues, Matthews—is it too familiar of me to address you by name ? ”

“ Shut up ; you’re talking too much.”

“ Hard, not to say unkind words. Besides, scarcely complimentary. Like your muddle-headed Chief, you are apparently already regarding me as a criminal of some sort. A delightful delusion ! Well, if you won’t drink, I really must smoke.”

But this solace was to be denied him, it seemed.

“ Keep your hands out of your pockets ; how do I know you haven’t got a gun there ? ”

A mocking laugh rang through the room.

“ Matthews, you amuse me. It’s a pity we haven’t met before. I, a retired jute merchant of the City of London, to be suspected of carrying a revolver !—and in the pocket of a suit that cost me fifteen guineas ! ”

Matthews, whose dislike of the man increased every minute, was taunted into a reply.

“ You retired early,” he said scoffingly.

“ The result of virtue, my dear Matthews. From my youth up, I have been a hard worker. Would you deprive me now of my reward ? ”

"All I want you to do is to stop talking," was the answer.

"But, my dear fellow, I must smoke—I can't stand here like a fool. I want tobacco. You can put your own hand in my pocket, if you like. I give you my word you will find nothing more alarming than a cigarette case."

"You'll stay just as you are. And I shall stay just as I am."

"In that case, there's no more to be said, apparently." The speaker made a violent shrug of his shoulders, and, in doing so, half turned so that his left hand was concealed from the detective.

Matthews, consequently, did not notice that Stevensson's thumb and first finger were twiddling a small knob that appeared to be part of the handsome mantelpiece.

"Turn round here," ordered the detective.

As Stevensson did so he laughed.

"Have you any idea how long I am to be kept waiting?" he inquired.

"No—I have not."

The laugh rose higher. It held now a thin, hysterical note which set the detective's nerves on edge. He was used to ordinary malefactors, but this devil was uncanny. He felt as though

the only way he could regain his self-confidence was to knock the man senseless—and that, of course, was out of the question. But the longer he remained in the other's presence, the more uncertain he became of himself. It was as though the other was exerting some mysterious influence over him.

He ought to have kept silent, he knew, but was taunted again into speech.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"My dear Matthews, I feel *bound* to laugh. The situation is so funny—so deucedly humorous. Of course, I can't explain it, but if you were in my place, you'd laugh. Yes, I feel certain you would laugh." And another burst of thin, cacophonous merriment rang out.

"You've got some joke on," declared Matthews.

"How intelligent you are—especially for a detective! According to all the stories I've read, your class are singularly deficient even in common sense. But why should you think I have a joke on?" The narrow, mocking face that might have belonged to a mediæval poisoner intent upon watching one of his victims in his death throes, thrust itself forward. To the detective it seemed to be the countenance of a fiend. Matthews could hold himself back no

longer ; his last shred of self-control went, and he rushed forward.

Only Stevensson's right hand and arm moved. Before the detective's hands could touch his flesh, a spurt of flame came from the right-hand jacket pocket. There was no sound—but the other halted, flung up his arms, swayed, and then crumpled to the floor.

“ Poor fool ! ” commented Stevensson.

* * * * *

The next few minutes showed a scene of tremendous activity in that room. Stevensson went to the big bureau, opened it, and began thrusting papers of various kinds into the pockets of the overcoat which he had taken from a hook behind a screen. The same screen which . . .

But there was no time to bother about that now. If the police had only known. . . . If they had only searched that room first. . . .

One of Simon Stevensson's few virtues was that of courage. There was a smile on his face as, patting the pockets of his overcoat to make sure that the papers were safe, he stepped quickly across the room and opened the window.

That must be his exit. With two dead bodies left as evidence, he had to get to his car and be away as quickly as possible. Birchall had

been right, after all : France was indicated for at least a short visit.

Dropping lightly on to a flower-bed, he started to run towards the garage. The excitement—a greater excitement than he had ever known before ; that was, perhaps, the reason he had stayed, he reflected—was stimulating him until he felt that he would not have missed this experience for anything. The joy of turning the tables on that fat-headed Inspector and his assistants ! At this particular moment, they were struggling to get out of a cellar which would hold them until they rotted—unless some unexpected help came. There would be Laidley, the two men with him, and the young fool Crane—all together ! All cursing and raving, and behaving as though each and all had gone mad. It was a gratifying reflection.

And he was safe ! That secret switch in the mantelpiece which had closed the opening to the cellar had made him so. Free to ride away in the crisp air in his Rolls and to catch the night boat from Newhaven—Folkestone would be too risky, perhaps. And, although he had not Ferguson's second design, he had the first—and that was worth a fortune.

The Empress ? Birchall ? He didn't know.

Time enough to think of them when he got to Paris. Perhaps he would run the thing on his own : he didn't see any reason why he shouldn't.

His wind was giving out as he turned the corner which led to the garage. He was beginning to puff—too much wine. . . . Still, he was the victor—he had got away.

Then, like a thunderbolt from an avenging god, came disaster. Through the thickly-gathering darkness there loomed up the figure of a stoutly-built man. This lunged itself at him and brought him down.

"Just in time," he heard a voice with a slight American twang say.

He struggled like an animal caught in a trap. But the other had no mercy, squeezing harder on his windpipe every second.

Just before he swooned away, he heard his assailant say :

"Get on into the house ; there's some dirty business going on there. I'll see to this bird . . ."

That was all—the black tide which had been lapping about his lips enveloped him entirely.

After slipping a pair of handcuffs on the unconscious man, Whittle went himself to the house. He had never expected to be in at the death in

this fashion ; only an extraordinary chance had brought him there. On the way down, he had reflected on the irony of the situation : his companions were crooks—at least, men who, from time to time, still engaged in criminal practices—but he was as convinced of their loyalty to him as though they had been recruited from Scotland Yard itself. Abe Goldschmidt had proved a friend indeed ; he had not only sent Tim Hogan and two other men to rescue him from his prison, but had afterwards supplied half a dozen tough guys to accompany him on the journey to Mandling.

Beyond telephoning to Watson at the Yard to tell him to call at The Empress's house in Curzon Street, he had not delayed a moment : the need was too urgent for that. Besides, a couple of fast cars were already waiting.

" You'll have to burn the dust, Charlie," Tim Hogan had said, " if what you think is happening down in Kent. Gee ! You don't suppose we'd go back on you, do you ? Not when Abe sent us himself ? "

After that, his hesitation, momentary as that had been, vanished.

They had driven like the wind, beating all speed limits, and narrowly escaping several

disasters. But, apparently, they had got there in time—or hadn't they? The very fact that this man who, judging from the description given by Crane, must be Svensson, the king-pin of the outfit, was sneaking away, seemed ominous.

Once inside the house, Whittle found chaos reigning. A bewildered police constable, his helmet awry, and the perspiration pouring down his face, was endeavouring to make himself understood by the group of men who surrounded him. P.C. George Johnson's plight would have been amusing in any other circumstances; as it was, it merely accentuated the grimness of the situation.

"Two have been croaked, Charlie," Tim Hogan announced, pointing to the forms laid side by side on the floor of the room furnished as a library.

The American detective frowned. The woman was the red-headed girl who had accosted him that morning in Curzon Street. In spite of her hostility, she had appealed to him: there had been a piquancy about her.

"And this guy," went on Hogan, standing over the dead body of Matthews, "is a Scotland Yard dick—at least, Funny-Face over there says

he is. There's three others about somewhere—an Inspector called Laidley, from Folkestone, with two of his men."

Whittle thrust him amiably on one side.

"Leave this to me, Tim," he said; "I'll try to speak his language."

Conscious of the deep embarrassment of the village constable, he took Johnson's arm and led him into a corner of the room.

"It's all right, officer," he said kindly; "don't you worry. It's no blame to you; I can see that. Now, tell me exactly what's happened."

Johnson wiped his face once again with yesterday's handkerchief.

"It's like 'ell let loose," he said; "I dunno where I am. I've been shoutin' for the h'Inspector—but can't get no reply."

"Steady now—bit by bit. It'll all come right in the end. Is it correct that there's a police Inspector here with two men?"

"Yes, sir. Inspector Laidley, from Folkestone. 'E came 'ere earlier this afternoon, but couldn't find anythin'. Then, when I called in at 'The Jolly Sailor,' I 'appened to mention that I knowed this 'ouse had been built on the ruins o' a monastery, an' that it 'ad deep cellars, an' 'e was off like a shot. 'Thank you, Johnson,' 'e said;

'now you've given me the clue to the mystery.'
I——"

Whittle stilled the hubbub with an uplifted hand.

"Did you come with the inspector?"

"Yes, sir. 'E told me to wait in the 'all 'ere, an' stop anybody a-comin' in or a-goin' out."

"Where did the inspector go?"

"'E went down to 'ave a look at these 'ere cellars. Where they be, I dunno—somewhere underground, I s'pose. Sharp as a knife, 'e were; collared one o' these crooks, shoved some 'andcuffs on 'im, an' then 'e said: 'Come on, me man, let's h'inspect these cellars o' yours.' With that 'e went away—'e an' 'is two men."

"Where?"

"Over there. They vanished, an' that's all I knows."

"Have you seen anybody?"

"Not a soul, sir. But I knowed that one o' the inspector's men was in this room, an' that 'e 'ad instructions to watch some other feller. I 'eard 'em talkin' for a while, but then everything went quiet, an' I 'ad me soospicions, see?"

"Quite right of you, officer."

"So, after another while, I tiptoed to the door, opened it a crack an' looked in. An', oh, my

God, sir, there was that——"—the rustic's face quivered now in real emotion—"poor feller lyin' there—*oh-h-h!*" The recital was too much for the constable, and he raised both hands for a moment to his face as though to shut out the dreadful sight.

"You don't know the name of the man this poor fellow was watching?"

"Yes, I do, sir. 'Twas a villain called Stevenson. 'E must be a villain, 'cos 'e's gone. And I allus thought 'e was such a gen'leman! Allus wished me 'good mornin'' pleasant-like. But if I could catch'n now——!" A huge, begrimed fist was clenched.

"Don't you worry; he's safe enough. I caught him myself as he was running away."

"Thank God for that, sir. Who be you, may I ask?"

"I'm an American detective. My name's Whittle. I'm a friend of Superintendent Watson at Scotland Yard."

"Scotland Yard, eh? 'Twas they who telephoned to the inspector. W'ot does all this mean, sir?"

"You'll learn before the night's out, officer. The thing at the moment is to find Inspector Laidley and his men. They're probably in those

cellars still. Do you know your way about this house ? ”

“ Never been in it afore in me life, sir. But I do know that there be the cellers—’cos Mr. Farrant, who builded ‘ The White ’Ouse ’ a few years ago, spoke to me about them. ’E was a rare one for ’is wine, was Mr. Farrant. . . . ”

“ Well, we must make a search,” declared Whittle; and, calling Hogan, who was acting as Chief-of-Staff, he disclosed the situation to him.

But the closest examination of the kitchen quarters revealed nothing of the missing men. And of underground regions there was not a sign.

CHAPTER XXV THE DOOR OF STEEL

It was the sight of that still form lying on the floor at the farther side of this huge underground room that made Inspector Laidley and the other two men rush forward.

"He's dead," said a voice ; " his heart gave out a short while ago."

The police inspector looked at his informer.

"What's your name ? " he asked.

"Crane."

"Well, your troubles are over, my lad. We belong to the Folkestone police. Word came through from the Yard that you and another man were being kept prisoners here. Sounds silly——"

"But it's true. If you only knew what it means to see you. . . ."

"That's all right, my lad," said the inspector, a hint of emotion beneath the gruffness ; " haven't I told you your troubles are over ? "

As though suddenly recollecting, the speaker turned round.

"Where's that man?" he asked.

But the guide had vanished. They were alone.

One of the detectives out-thrust a hand.

"Look at that!" he cried.

Coming swiftly down from the low ceiling was what looked like a solid sheet of steel. Whilst they still stared, this completed its descent.

"Trapped!" exclaimed the inspector.

It was not an over-statement. This barrier, which was on their side of the door, when they rushed to it, proved immovable.

Brushing them aside, Philip beat upon it with his bare hands. In the space of ten seconds he had been dashed from the heights of joy to the depths of despair. This miraculous rescue had proved to be merely a mockery. In some way Svensson had outwitted his enemies and had scored the final trick.

Inspector Laidley turned to him.

"Do you know anything about this?" he asked.

"No—except that we shall be left here to die like rats in a hole. It's Svensson's doing. He encouraged you to come here, no doubt?"

Laidley gnawed his lower lip.

"Cunning swine," he said tensely.

"Yes, 'cunning swine' is right. He wanted to get you down here, don't you see. And he then pressed on a button or something, and he had you safe while he got away himself. Isn't it clear to you?" Crane's voice was rising in hysteria. "And I promised—I promised . . ."

The strain was taking its toll; he had reached the end of his endurance. It only required a look at the dead Ferguson to set all his nerves jangling.

Laidley forced himself to take command.

"It's useless to talk like that," he said; "there must be some way out." But, even as he spoke, he realised the falsity of the words. The position was becoming increasingly clear to him. It was what this young fellow had said: Stevensson had scored the final trick. No wonder the man had smiled!

The words of one of his men did not give reassurance.

"We must be at least fifty feet down here, Inspector," he said; "even if we shouted, I don't suppose anyone would be able to hear."

"Shout as much as you like," cried Crane; "it won't do any good. We're right down in

the bowels of the earth." He felt this to be the end. Until now, there had always been a faint hope. Even the sudden end of the enlisted forger, tragic as this was, had not defeated him completely; looking ahead, he was able to realise that the death of her father might prove a blessing to the girl. At least it would save her the agony of seeing him in the dock. Surveying it philosophically, it was the best thing that could have happened.

Up to the present moment he had not thought so much of himself; the presence of the forger had made him concentrate attention upon his fellow prisoner; for it was impossible to look at the other man without thinking of the girl who was waiting for him to redeem his promise.

Promise! With the others, he was destined to stay there—and die. . . .

It was an exasperating moment, and Whittle made no attempt to hide his chagrin.

"I'm beginning to think, Johnson, that your precious cellars exist only in your own mind," he said.

The Mandling constable did not give way before the attack.

" Well, if they exist only in my own mind, where's the h'inspector an' the other two men ? They left me determined to find the cellers, an' if they 'aven't found 'em, where be they ? If they 'ave found 'em, then it seems to me to be our dooty to keep on tryin' lookin' for 'em."

Picking a word here and there out of the maze, there certainly seemed some sense in the constable's remarks.

" The hayseed's right, Charlie," said Tim Hogan ; " it ain't likely that the inspector, not to mention his two men, would vanish in the way they seem to have done. Unless they gave chase and haven't got back yet. Anyhow," looking at Simon Stevansson, who had been brought in and placed in a chair, " we'll soon get to know. Ever heard of the Third Degree, Stevansson ? " he asked.

" You won't get anything out of me." And it was plain that the man meant it.

" Let me have a real go at him," suggested Hogan, with a grimace that would have caused the ordinary person to shudder.

" No—not yet." But Whittle knew himself to be in a quandary. It was likely that Hogan would soon get out of hand. Raised in the stews

of New York's criminal quarter, such a man was not prone to have too many scruples; and, acting under the orders of Abe Goldschmidt, he had attached himself with such fervour to the American detective's service that . . . Well, Whittle scarcely cared to contemplate the immediate future. Hogan was quite capable of cutting Stevensson's heart out of his body if the man refused to speak. And that Stevensson held the secret was a certainty.

"Do 'e mind if I say somethin', sir?"

It was the ridiculous Mandling police constable again. He was standing by the side of the handsome mahogany fire-place, his helmet tilted to the back of his head and both thumbs planted in his belt.

"Ye may laugh at w'ot's in me mind, sir," he went on, without waiting for the permission he had requested, "but this 'ere affair is very rummy—no doubt about that. It reminds me o' one o' those stories you read about in the papers—you know, them there serials. Now," he continued, his moon-like face brightening up, "I shouldn't be a bit surprised if there weren't somethin' in this 'ere fire-place that acted as a secret——" He broke off. His bucolic mind registered something. The man he had been addressing was

craning forward, his eyes fixed on Svensson's face.

Both had betrayed themselves, but Whittle was the first to recover. Hogan, who had burst into a laugh at what he considered the village constable's asininity, was surprised to hear Whittle remark encouragingly to Johnson :

“ What was that you were going to say ? ”

P.C. George Johnson drew a deep breath. If he had been a hen instead of a man, it would have been a pretty safe bet to have wagered he was ready to deliver himself of an egg.

“ W’ot I were goin’ to say,” he repeated, “ was that I shouldn’t be at all surprised if there were not somethin’ in this ’ere fire-place connectin’ up with the cellers. A couple o’ year ago, when I were at Folkestone, I saw a play called ‘ The ’Ouse of ’Orror,’ an’ there were a contraption in the fire-place which were kind o’ secret like. ’Ere——”

The unexpected fruit of his mind was cut off like a blossom nipped by a frost. The man himself was thrust aside, and Whittle, who had stepped forward, paid no heed to his remonstrance.

A strong but well-kept hand wandered over the woodwork of the mantelpiece.

"But this is daft," he said, with sudden derision.

"Daft!" echoed Tim Hogan; "it's pure bologny!"

"You're right, Hogan; I was a fool to listen to the sap." Whittle, with surprising cruelty of speech, corroborated the expression. But, all the time, his eyes were fixed on Simon Stevansson's face.

It was a duel of psychology, of nerve-control and facial impassivity. But he won. He turned swiftly again: he had read in Stevansson's features what he wanted to read.

"There may be something in this knob," he mused slowly; and when a half-stifled cry came from the handcuffed man, he got to work on it with finger and thumb. It proved immovable to the right, but when he tried the reverse action the knob slowly began to revolve beneath his touch.

"Look!" cried one of the detectives; "it's moving, sir! It's going up!"

Fascinated, the four men who had imagined that they would never leave that vault alive

watched the sheet of steel that formed such an impassable barrier to freedom slowly raise itself from the floor. Higher, higher, inch by inch, it went, until, presently, it had disappeared into the roof above.

For a few moments they remained stupefied by the miracle. By what agency it had been done they did not know ; it was sufficient that now only the wooden door remained between them and release.

It was Philip Crane who spoke first.

"Come on, you fellows," he said ; "we can break this down between us. Now, then, altogether !"

In a frenzied, combined rush they threw themselves on the door, heard it crack, and then retired for a final onslaught.

This time there could be no resisting that human battering-ram. With a loud crash the door gave, and they found themselves lying higgledy-piggledy, one on top of the other, in the cold passage at the bottom of a long flight of steep stone steps.

Before they could raise themselves a man showed himself above them.

Crane, the youngest of the party, and the lightest on his feet, bounded up the steps. This

man supplied the explanation : he had been their saviour.

Whittle caught the younger man in his arms and almost embraced him.

" You're still alive then, kid ? "

" Yes—thanks to you. But——"

" Don't waste any more words now ; we've got to get out of this hell. Just leave all explanations for the moment."

" All right."

By this time they had been joined by the other three men. Whittle quickly introduced himself.

" Watson won't be the man to forget this," remarked Inspector Laidley, as he shook the American's hand. " I don't mind telling you that I thought all our numbers were up. How did you find the secret of that steel door ? "

" Upstairs," said the American detective impressively, " we have a genius. His name is George Sherlock Johnson Holmes." Whilst the four auditors listened to him in astonishment, he burst into a roar of laughter.

" It was the most comic thing I've ever known," he went on ; " this man, who, though a good guy, is actually the biggest fool I've ever come across, suggested that the mechanism of the steel door

might be worked in the same way as some dud mystery play he had once witnessed at Folkestone—and, sure to God, he was right ! ” the speaker wound up, awe in his tones ; “ never tell me after this that the crime novelists don’t know their job ! ”

It was a party of three that sat down to another of Mrs. Hamble's appetising meals an hour later. Margery Ferguson was the guest of honour. On her right sat Philip Crane, and on her left Charles Whittle.

It had been necessary to break the news of her father's death, but, as Crane had anticipated, after the first shock, the information had given her relief. After all, she was young, and therefore resilient, and, instead of a father who had brought her nothing but grief, she had now found a friend who promised. . . . But her thoughts could not go beyond the present.

It was not until the meal was over that Whittle, lighting a cigar, started on what he called a "tour of explanation."

"I know what you're dying to ask," he said to Crane; "you want to know what happened to me in this inn last night? Always a good sleeper, I went bang off almost as soon as I put my head on the pillow. I was awakened by a

funny sort of noise, and I guessed something was wrong. It sounded like a scuffle.

“ I opened the door, but no sooner had I put my head through than I got a whang on the back of the bean ; and, although I did my best to catch the fellow round the legs, it was no good. I went dead off into unconsciousness. When I came to it was still dark, but quiet. I went along to your room, and saw it was empty. Then I guessed what had happened : they had concentrated on you—they probably recognised you from the description which Stevensson must have given them. And perhaps the fellow who hit me thought he had finished me off. The mistake Stevensson made was not to send enough men for the job : they could cart one away, but not two.”

The speaker paused to puff at his cigar.

“ When I realised they'd got you, I nearly went mad,” he continued ; “ the only thing that saved me, I think, was picking up on the floor of your room the torn part of what must have been a letter. It was only a few inches, but it gave me a clue.

“ I knew it was no good going back to ‘ The White House ’—where I guessed you'd been taken—so I got away to the station (I couldn't see our friend Mrs. Hamble anywhere, and it seemed a

shame to wake her up at that hour) as quickly as I could, and caught the first train to London. All the time, the address on that bit of paper was burning itself into my brain.

"Directly I got to Charing Cross I got a Post Office Directory and found—well, what do you think I found?"

"How should I know?" smiled Crane.

"Why," declared Whittle triumphantly, "that piece of paper, which had evidently dropped from the pocket of one of the gang, was nothing less than the address of a Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair. I thought it funny that a woman living in Curzon Street, Mayfair, should be mixed up with crooks like that, and the least I could do, it seemed to me, was to pay this good lady a call.

"It wouldn't have done to go in my own capacity, but when I saw a van outside her house belonging to Jardine's, the well-known caterers, I turned myself into a representative of that firm, and so got into the place.

"When I saw the woman, I knew that I'd landed right. This Mrs. Aubyn St. Clair was a crook I'd come across some time back on an Atlantic liner; and, putting two and two together, I decided that she must be none other than the chief of the gang."

" The Empress ? "

" Yes, kid ! The Empress."

" What did she say to you ? "

" It was what I said to her ! I gave her to understand that I knew her little goings-on, and told her that if she didn't ring up ' The White House ' and order you to be released, I should visit a particular kind of hell upon her lovely but corrupt self. She pretended to be indifferent ; but it's worked out all right, hasn't it ? "

It was Margery Ferguson who replied. Her lips were trembling as she said :

" I, for one, will never be able to thank you, Mr. Whittle."

" It won't be me you'll have to thank, young lady, I'm thinking," replied the American detective, with a broad grin ; " ahem ! I think I'll go for a little stroll. It seems a fine night, and," with a still broader grin and a wink at Crane, " I've been missing my exercise lately."

With that, the two were left alone.

" I suppose," started Crane, " I ought to be very cross with you."

" Why ? " she asked.

" Well, didn't you deliberately disobey my orders ? Why did you leave the convent ? "

There was a light in her eyes as she leaned forward.

"I realised suddenly," she replied, "that I had been selfish—that, in endeavouring to study my own wishes, I had allowed you to go into danger. After that, of course, I couldn't stay in London—I knew you would keep to your promise, and so I came to Mandling in the hope that I could see you before anything very terrible happened."

Philip smiled. Looking at his companion gave him a sense of almost ridiculous happiness. So buoyant were his spirits that he felt he could have laughed out loud.

"Well," he said, "you've seen me—and what now?"

"I must thank you—of course." Gone was her former seriousness; a dimpling smile had taken the place of the care-worn expression; she looked almost radiant.

"You've come to the wrong person, Miss Ferguson; it isn't me you should thank—it's the man who's just gone out. If it hadn't been for him——"

"No. That's not right. If I hadn't met you, you wouldn't have met Mr. Whittle. And then anything could have happened."

To the right of the table at which they sat were a couple of comfortable easy chairs. The huge log fire which had been placed on the hearth at the beginning of the meal was now crackling cheerfully. And as the sparks fell, they seemed to his excited fancy to form themselves into a message: "Draw near; draw near and enjoy me. For I am the god of warmth, and I always send out good cheer to lovers."

Philip rose and placed his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Come over by the fire," he said.

Neither of them knew exactly how it happened, but when Margery stumbled, she was gathered into a pair of arms that held her so tightly that she thought she would never be allowed release. And she did not want it. This was the only really happy moment she had known for many years. She listened dreamily to the words that came to her.

"This is a night of happenings," she heard the man say; "but it's not over yet. I want to ask you a question."

"Yes?" she prompted.

"To-morrow I go back to Cornwall——" he started.

"But, your holiday?"

"I've had my holiday." Above her head he grinned like a schoolboy remembering an adventure. "Now, this is my question: will you come back with me?"

"To your home?"

"Of course. I want to introduce you to my uncle. He's the most mid-Victorian thing on earth, but a dear old boy, all the same. You'll love him—and he'll love you."

"I can't—it's absurd——"

"Why?"

"You know nothing of me. My father was——"

"That means nothing. It would have meant nothing if he were still living. I want you. The one person I thought about when it seemed that I should never leave that ghastly cellar was—you!"

"A stranger."

"No. I believe there are people who go round the world trying for years to find each other. You and I belong to them. From the first moment I saw you, I knew it. I have known it every minute since. . . . Don't tell me, my dear, it's absurd for me to have fallen in love with you as I did. These things happen—and there you are. Have you nothing to say?"

She lifted her face, but before her lips could speak he had smothered them in a kiss.

Mrs. Hamble, who had quietly opened the door, closed it again, after pursing her lips, shaking her head significantly.

"The sweet things," she murmured; "no wonder that Mr. Wiffle left them alone. . . ."

Sir Timothy Padden, nodding sagaciously over his favourite briar, listened patiently until the end.

"I was wrong, my boy," he admitted generously; "you appear to have met Romance, and in a few hours, although the world moves so fast." He paused for a moment, and then continued:

"But there are one or two things I should like to ask you. First, what became of the man that your American detective friend shot in the grounds of 'The White House' on that first night?"

"What a mind you've got, sir!" scoffed his nephew good-humouredly; "so much happened that I didn't give a thought to the fellow. Since you ask me, I don't think that Whittle *could* have hit him, because Stevensson never mentioned the fact. The man probably had his hair

singed, or something, and got the wind up so badly he gave his scream. And he may have been instrumental in inducing some of the others to push off, because when the place was cleaned up, everybody had moved off except Stevensson."

"What? Didn't you tell me that one of them was handcuffed?"

"Yes—but a handcuffed man can run, uncle. I should have liked to have had the chance, I can assure you!"

Sir Timothy Padden, having taken his first sip at sensation, was loath to let the matter drop.

"Don't be in a hurry, my boy," as Philip looked towards the door; "there are one or two other things I want to ask you. What about the code letters you received at the hotel? Did you really lock them up?"

"Yes. By the way, that reminds me: I must drop a line to the Yard about them. And now," with another look at the door, "if you'll excuse me, sir . . ."

"All right, my boy," chuckled the old man; "and—yes—you might give her one for me."

